Australia: Aurizon coal train crews face union sell-out

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Around 200 train crew workers at rail freight haulage operator Aurizon's Hunter Valley depots in New South Wales (NSW) walked off the job for 48 hours last weekend. It was the second consecutive weekend stoppage in the protracted dispute for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

The strikes involve crews from the company's Mayfield, Antiene and Quirindi depots and are part of a broader campaign of industrial action, which was overwhelmingly endorsed in July by Aurizon workers. An indefinite ban on working before or after agreed start and finishing times was initiated last weekend.

The Hunter Valley crews haul coal produced by major mining companies in the region, including BHP, Peabody Energy, Whitehaven and Yancoal. Last financial year Aurizon transported 52.3 million metric tons of coal in the Hunter Valley, up 10 percent from 47.7 million the previous year.

The July vote reflected rail haulage workers' determination to fight to improve wages and conditions, which have been systematically eroded over the years in each union-negotiated enterprise agreement with Aurizon.

From the outset of the current dispute the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has worked to break up workers' willingness to fight. The recent stoppages, the first called by the union during the course of the dispute, are an attempt to diffuse rank-and-file anger as the RTBU pushes for new negotiations with the company and prepares a sell-out. Negotiations have dragged on since October 2017.

In July, the RTBU claimed that most disputed issues had been settled but released few details. The matters remaining in contention, it said, included the scale of pay increases and concerns over the possible introduction of monitoring equipment in train cabins, which would be used by management to spy on train crews.

The union wants a 3 percent annual pay rise over three years, but this has been ruled out by Aurizon, which has offered only 2.5 percent, barely above the official 2.1 percent official inflation rate.

The RTBU is cynically using workers' concerns over in-cab monitoring as a means to deliver the company its current pay offer. In a recent union bulletin, the RTBU indicated it was willing to present the 2.5 percent annual pay increase to its members in exchange for a company assurance that cab-monitoring would not be introduced in the new EA.

Aurizon has thus far rejected the union's "offer" and could impose retaliatory lockouts in response to further strikes, a tactic it employed in 2014 to push through the last cost-cutting EA.

In that dispute, the company and the union relied on the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal government's pro-business industrial tribunal, to close down all strike action and enforce the continuation of negotiations.

The Fair Work industrial laws, which contain a raft of draconian anti-strike provisions that are regularly used against workers, were introduced in 2009 by the former federal Labor government, with the full support of the unions. Since then, all of the major unions, including the RTBU, have enforced the industrial tribunal's directives and invoked the Fair Work laws to prevent any industrial or political struggle by workers.

Earlier this year the RTBU called off a 24-hour strike by 9,000 NSW railway employees on the order of the FWC. The union then negotiated a cost-cutting sell-out deal, which included the expansion of contract and casual labour, forced redundancies and ongoing restructures across the Sydney and NSW network.

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The union similarly used the Fair Work intervention in 2014 to push through significant cuts at Aurizon. This included dropping its call for a 38-hour week and allowing the company to maintain a 42-hour week with forced overtime.

The 2014 Aurizon lockout had the full backing of the federal Liberal-National Party government, the Labor Party opposition, major coal companies and other sections of big business. They were all anxious to prevent any major hold up in the key resources sector and to set a benchmark for cuts to be imposed elsewhere.

The *Australian Financial Review* hailed the lockout, declaring that workers "should recognise the good times of the resources boom and complacent management are over."

In an attempt to persuade Aurizon workers not to hold further stoppages, the company recently issued a statement declaring that "no one wins" from industrial action. It cited the outcome of the EA dispute earlier this year at rival rail-haulage company Pacific National, where the RTBU restricted workers to a campaign of limited stoppages.

The result, Aurizon declared, was a "rollover" of the Pacific National NSW Coal & Bulk enterprise agreement as a foundation for the 2018 EA. This, Aurizon stated, showed that industrial action "achieved nothing."

The statement, which inadvertently exposed the RTBU's sell-out of Pacific National workers, sent the union into damage control. It immediately published a bulletin claiming that Aurizon's assertion was "blatantly untrue" and that the 2018 Pacific National EA was "substantially better than the last one."

The truth is the Pacific National agreement delivered considerable concessions to the company on wages and conditions, including a pay increase of just 9 percent over four years. The union's claim that this was "substantially better" than the 16 percent over four years in the previous agreement is transparently false.

The RTBU also agreed to a clause that requires only that Pacific National "consult" its workforce before "deciding to install" in-cab monitoring equipment. Consultation requirements are invariably a means of hosing down workers' concerns and assisting the union to implement the company's plans.

Aurizon workers must draw the lessons of these bitter experiences and take the conduct of their dispute out of the hands of RTBU, which functions as an industrial policeman of the employers and governments.

The ongoing assault on railway workers, in the private and public sectors, underscores the need for new independent organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees. Such democratically controlled formations would be tasked with unifying transport and haulage workers across the country in an industrial and political movement against the cost-cutting agenda of the corporations, Labor and Liberal-National governments, federal and state alike, and the unions.

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