

Australia: Thousands of NSW rail workers to strike Tuesday

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More than 8,000 train drivers, guards and other railway workers across Sydney and New South Wales (NSW), plan to strike for four hours from 9 a.m. Tuesday morning.

The strike follows several weeks of limited work bans over new enterprise agreements (EAs), currently being negotiated between the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU)—along with various other unions—and management of the government-owned Sydney Trains and NSW Trains passenger rail services.

Previous actions in the campaign have mostly been limited by the union to individual sections of the workforce, including 24-hour bans on cleaning of graffiti, issuing transposition slips and hazardous waste removal, as well as one day on which station staff performed their duties while sitting down.

On Wednesday, workers placed a 24-hour ban on overtime, and yesterday implemented a work-to-rule order. Today, trains will operate at a maximum speed of 60 kilometres per hour and stop at all stations.

The timing of the strike, outside of the morning and afternoon peak periods and during school holidays, as well as its short duration, are designed by the union to ensure minimal disruption to normal operations, under conditions where passenger traffic is already substantially reduced, due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Nevertheless, the strike is a significant expression of mounting anger, in the transport industry and the working class more broadly, as the COVID-19 pandemic has been used as a pretext to massively accelerate the assault on working-class jobs and conditions.

The action comes after a 24-hour national strike on Thursday by 2,000 StarTrack trucking workers, and will be followed by a strike at FedEx next Thursday. Last month, around 4,000 Toll workers struck for 24

hours, the first major strike in the trucking industry in at least a decade, and the first ever at Toll.

A central aspect of the rail dispute is the introduction of the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), a line of 55 Korean-built trains that Transport for NSW (TfNSW) is planning to introduce for commuter service on the Central Coast and Newcastle, Blue Mountains, and South Coast lines.

The NIF was originally expected to roll out in 2019, but has not yet begun carrying passengers due to the objections of workers, who have raised concerns about the safety of the trains.

The new “Mariyung” trains were explicitly designed for driver-only operation, raising the possibility that guards will be eliminated. While NSW Trains claims that guards will be retained, the company intends to change their role to “customer service guards,” saddling them with a host of other duties. This will increase the workload of drivers, who will have to simultaneously monitor 10 CCTV images of the carriages and platform, as the train is arriving at and departing from each station.

Several of the changes, proposed to the existing EA by the company, indicate that further attacks, such as the sacking of guards, are planned over the next three years. This includes the removal of clauses in the agreement, requiring mutual agreement or arbitration for changes to working conditions.

While appeals to the courts, based on these clauses, have so far been used to delay the introduction of the NIF, the path of arbitration through the pro-business industrial relations framework is a dead end for workers. The unions frequently promote these institutions as a means of preventing a genuine struggle against employer attacks, and as a mechanism for subordinating them to the capitalist state.

The RTBU has also raised that Sydney Trains is demanding greater “flexibility” from infrastructure workers, in order to become more competitive with private providers.

The union criticised this move, stating: “Let’s not forget that it is Transport for NSW who allows private operators into the space in the first place. Sydney Trains are simply creating a race to the bottom.”

In fact, this race to the bottom has been facilitated by the RTBU, which negotiated the “flexibility” provisions in the Metro Trains Sydney EA that Transport for NSW is now seeking to apply to their members in the public sector.

Sydney Trains and NSW Trains are offering workers a meagre pay “rise” of 0.3 percent this year, followed by 2.5 percent in each of the following two years. The 0.3 percent figure is part of a wage freeze, implemented across the state’s public sector last year, with the blessing of the union-endorsed “independent umpire,” the NSW Industrial Relation Commission.

Despite an announcement in June, by NSW Treasurer Dominic Perrottet, that this austerity move, rammed through under the guise of the COVID-19 pandemic, would end, and annual 2.5 percent rises across the sector would again be “baked in,” the offer to rail workers has not been increased.

The 2.5 percent Labour Expenses Cap is itself a guarantee that public sector wages are constantly declining, in real terms. Under this cap, introduced by the state Labor government in 2008 and formalised by the Coalition in 2011, wage increases are limited to this sub-inflation figure, unless “cost savings,” i.e. sackings, are found elsewhere in the organisation.

This was enforced by the RTBU in the previous rail workers’ EA in 2018, when the union agreed to job cuts in exchange for a 3 percent per annum pay rise. This sell-out deal was rammed through, despite intense hostility among workers.

In January 2018, the Fair Work Commission cancelled a 24-hour strike at the eleventh hour, after an attempt by the RTBU to convince workers to call it off, and accept a rotten deal, which was overwhelmingly rejected by workers. The union enforced the strike ban and then pushed through the EA.

The RTBU’s own pay demands in the current dispute are themselves completely inadequate, and are aimed at crafting another sell-out. The union is calling for 3.5

percent per annum, in circumstances where recent official figures showed a 3.8 percent annual CPI increase. The RTBU will not challenge the Labour Expenses Cap, meaning that if the meagre 3.5 percent increase is agreed to, the union will again accept, and enforce, job cuts across the companies.

In a further indication that job cuts are on the horizon, Sydney Trains and NSW Trains are also seeking to reduce maximum redundancy payouts, from 64 to 12 weeks’ pay after ten years’ service.

Rail workers can defend their basic rights only through a break with the RTBU, and the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees.

In collaboration with similar committees throughout the transport industry—including their counterparts in the soon-to-be fully privatised bus sector—rail workers must fight for a socialist program, including the genuine public ownership and workers’ control of mass transit and its operation to meet the needs of workers and society, not profit and government austerity.



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