

Australia: Thousands of NSW railway workers strike over enterprise agreement

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New South Wales (NSW) passenger train services ground to a halt on Tuesday morning as more than 8,000 train drivers, guards and other railway workers across the state carried out a four-hour strike.

The industrial action was taken as part of ongoing negotiations over new enterprise agreements (EAs) with Sydney Trains and NSW Trains, the government-owned corporations that operate the state's railways on behalf of Transport for NSW (TfNSW).

Following weeks of limited work bans, the workers walked off the job at 8 a.m. Tuesday and a small group staged a brief protest outside Sydney's Central Station. Due to COVID-19 public health orders the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) could not hold a mass rally and instead carried out a "digital picket" via Zoom and Facebook.

The first speaker was Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) President Michele O'Neil. She invoked the 1917 NSW rail dispute, declaring that: "At its height, 100,000 workers were on strike. The strike lasted for six weeks. There were constant marches in the major cities and protests in smaller towns in NSW and in Victoria. And regular Sunday protests in the middle of Sydney had 150,000 people attending."

The attempt to draw a parallel between the struggles of 1917 and the actions of the unions today is a pathetic fraud. O'Neil represents an organisation that has done everything it can for the past forty years to suppress strikes and impose the dictates of the banks and the corporations. To the extent that the unions call strikes, they are of limited duration, as with Tuesday's stoppage, and are aimed at letting-off steam as the officials prepare a sell-out agreement.

The ACTU and its affiliates, moreover, have not led struggles by thousands of train staff. Instead they have overseen the destruction of thousands of rail jobs, and the imposition of the increasingly intolerable conditions that

have provoked the current dispute.

O'Neil's demagogic and historically-inaccurate remarks were an attempt to head-off mounting anger among workers over this record of betrayal, and to cover-up the fact that the unions of today are the equivalent of the company unions of the early 20th century, which did the bidding of bosses and the governments against workers they falsely claimed to represent.

Proving the point, RTBU NSW Branch Secretary Alex Claassens followed O'Neil by pleading for greater collaboration with the government and transport management. He said: "It's quite clear that we need those senior managers to come to the table, we need Transport for NSW to come to the table, we want the government to come to the table. Because until they show up, we're not going to get anywhere."

Plans for further industrial action were outlined in only the broadest of terms. The sole motion passed at the meeting stated: "Our membership endorses the action taken thus far and resolves to support taking whatever future action is necessary to ensure our rights are upheld and we get the respect we deserve."

Sydney Trains and NSW Trains are offering a wage "rise" of just 0.3 percent this year and 2.5 percent in each of the next two years. The RTBU is demanding 3.5 percent per annum, less than the rapidly increasing cost of living, especially in Sydney, where house prices are tipped by ANZ Bank to increase by 23 percent this year.

Even the paltry 3.5 percent figure will come with concessions. Under the NSW Labour Expenses Cap, introduced by the Labor government in 2008, any public sector wage increase of more than 2.5 percent means commensurate cost savings must be found elsewhere in the organisation. The RTBU will not challenge this provision, as it showed in the 2018 EA negotiations, when the union agreed to job cuts in exchange for a 3 percent wage rise.

Sydney Trains and NSW Trains are also demanding greater rostering flexibility, including the removal of limits on weekend work, night shifts and minimum shift lengths. As well, the companies are seeking changes to the EAs that will make it easier for them to alter workers' job descriptions.

These demands, along with the reduction of the maximum redundancy payout from 64 weeks to 12 weeks, make clear that TfNSW is attempting to prepare the way for major restructuring.

One component of this is the introduction of the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), which has so far been stymied by the opposition of workers, who have refused to crew the new trains because of safety concerns.

The new trains are designed for driver-only operation, with the guard's role replaced by a bevy of CCTV cameras the driver would monitor in addition to driving the train. While TfNSW insists that it does not intend to sack guards, they will instead become "customer service guards." This can only be seen as the first step to phasing-out guards or replacing them with less qualified workers.

Even under the initial plans for the NIF, guards will no longer open their doors at each station, instead relying on the CCTV monitors, prompting concerns that they will miss auditory cues to trouble on the platform.

More broadly, the moves to restructure the railways are motivated by the drive to full privatisation of the state's transport services. The transfer of Sydney's "Region 9" bus routes into private hands in April 2022 will mark the end of government-operated buses in the city, while Newcastle's bus service was privatised in 2017. The operation of Sydney Ferries was contracted out in 2012, while the city's light rail networks and the fully automated Sydney Metro train line are privately operated.

The RTBU, which "cautiously welcomed" the privatisation of buses in Newcastle, has enforced this transfer of public transport into corporate hands, which has brought about the slashing of routes, declining on-time performance and the destruction of working conditions.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed in August that the NSW government had engaged consultancy firm PwC to prepare a report on how the state's entire transport network could be "placed into a commercial corporation with a board and management independent of the government."

Also on Tuesday, around 60 drivers from the Inner West Light Rail (IWLR) service walked off the job from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and again from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. These workers

are members of the RTBU's Tram and Bus division.

In a stark demonstration of the extent to which the RTBU seeks to atomise its membership, not a single word was uttered about the light rail workers' strike during the railway workers' "digital picket." The RTBU Facebook page also contains no mention of the IWLR strike.

The issue at the heart of the IWLR dispute is itself a product of the union's isolation of workers and endorsement of the enterprise bargaining system, which forces workers to negotiate separate wage deals, not only per company, but, frequently, per worksite.

The IWLR workers are demanding parity of pay and conditions with drivers on the CBD and South East Light Rail (CSELR) line, which is also operated by Transdev. IWLR workers earn up to 15 percent less per hour than their counterparts on the CSELR and advance more slowly through pay grades. CSELR drivers can reach the highest pay grade after three years, while those on the IWLR have to put in at least five years of service.

Rail workers must reject the divisive tactics of the RTBU and appeal to their counterparts throughout the transport sector and the working class more broadly to mount a unified struggle against the assault on jobs, pay and conditions. The entire record of the union demonstrates that it will do everything it can to enforce the stepped-up drive for privatisation and the assault on conditions that this will inevitably entail.

Workers require their own independent organisations, including rank-and-file committees, in order to counter the management-union preparations for a sell-out, fight privatisation and secure a decent, well-paid job for all transport workers, without the threat of retrenchment. The alternative to the endless corporatisation of the sector and the drive to sell it off is the struggle for a workers' government, that will place all mass transport, along with the banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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