

Australia: Sydney rail workers strike for 24 hours

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New South Wales (NSW) rail workers carried out a partial 24-hour strike on Wednesday, as part of ongoing industrial action over bargaining for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

Train crews placed a ban on operating “privately built” rolling stock, reducing the capacity of the network by around 70 percent. The ban prevented the use of all trains built in the last two decades, including the so-called Waratah, Millennium and Oscar sets.

The current round of industrial action also includes:

- A two-week ban on overtime, starting October 24
- All station staff sitting down at work, indefinitely from October 19
- One-hour rolling strikes by signallers on October 25
- A 24-hour ban on track inspections on October 26
- 60km/h speed limit from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. on October 29

This follows a round of action late last month, including a four-hour strike on September 28, the first total stoppage on the state’s rails in decades.

In addition, around 1,000 Sydney Trains workers covered by the Electrical Trades Union began industrial action on Tuesday, placing a ban on working at sites without separate amenities for male and female workers, except in emergencies.

In a stark demonstration of the manner in which unions atomise and isolate workers, neither the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) or ETU have made any public mention of the simultaneous actions, although the workers are covered by the same enterprise agreement.

The RTBU claims that the earlier round of industrial action was met with “deathly silence” from management and the government.

RTBU NSW Branch Secretary Alex Claassens said on Channel 7’s “Sunrise” program on Wednesday:

“What we really want is to have the senior management of the railways and the government sit at the table.” Claassens expressed “hope” that the dispute could be brought to a swift conclusion, because, “the CEO of Sydney Trains is coming to the table today.”

Throughout the dispute, the union has complained that it has been forced to negotiate with “junior managers.” The RTBU’s main concern is not defending the jobs and conditions of workers, but ensuring that its senior bureaucrats have a “seat at the table” with management at the highest level.

For workers, pay is a key issue in the dispute. Transport for NSW (TfNSW), the government agency responsible for the state’s railways, is offering workers a wage “rise” of just 0.3 percent this year and 2.5 percent in each of the following two years. The RTBU is demanding 3.5 percent per annum, less than the current inflation rate of 3.8 percent.

Claassens made clear in an interview on 2GB radio on Wednesday that the union is likely to endorse a pay offer of even less than this meagre demand.

Claassens said: “You know that that log of claims is the process that starts the negotiation. That’s our wishlist.... The last time we were doing EA negotiation, we had 6 percent on the table. That’s a starting point, we haven’t even got to the money point yet.”

In the 2018 EA negotiation Claassens is referring to, workers ultimately received just a 3 percent pay increase. Even that paltry figure was only accepted by TfNSW after the union agreed to enforce job cuts.

Under the NSW Labour Expenses Cap, introduced by the Labor government in 2008, public sector wage increases are capped at 2.5 percent unless “savings” are made elsewhere in the organisation.

The RTBU will not challenge this provision, virtually guaranteeing that NSW rail workers will be subjected

to the slashing of jobs and cuts to overtime, in addition to sub-inflationary pay rises for those who keep their jobs.

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.

Another contentious issue is the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), a new line of trains that was originally planned to roll out in 2019, but which have not yet begun carrying passengers due to the objections of workers, who have raised concerns about the safety of the trains.

The “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.

In a move partly designed to facilitate the NIF roll out, TfNSW is seeking to remove clauses in the EA for mutual agreement or arbitration when it proposes changes to working conditions, including workers' job descriptions.

All of this is geared towards the eventual full privatisation of the state's railways. In Sydney, and in most of the state, rail is the sole remaining mode of “public” transport that has not been sold off.

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. The city's light rail networks and the fully automated Sydney Metro train line are privately operated.

NSW Labor leader Chris Minns, then shadow transport minister, claimed in 2019 that bus services were being sold off due to the Liberal government's “ideological obsession.” In reality, privatisation of public transport is the product of a pro-business program, aimed at subordinating social needs to the profit interests of big business, which is fully embraced by Labor and the unions.

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.

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 social need, not private profit and government austerity demands.



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