

Australia: Sydney rail workers hold 24-hour strike

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9 December 2021

New South Wales (NSW) train drivers held a limited 24-hour strike on Tuesday, as part of ongoing industrial action over bargaining for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

Rail workers refused to operate “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.

This follows a similar action by NSW rail workers on October 20, a four-hour strike on September 28 and a range of limited work bans over the past three months.

On October 23, in a post titled “Union members win first battle as Transport folds,” the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced that most industrial action would be temporarily suspended after an assurance from Transport for NSW (TfNSW) that union bureaucrats would be able to negotiate with “senior officers” from the agency and the chief executives of Sydney Trains and NSW Trains.

The union reported that TfNSW had also agreed to scrap its 0.3 percent pay “rise” offer, although the revised offer of 2.5 percent in fact comprised a 2.04 percent pay increase and a 0.5 percent superannuation bump.

The RTBU is asking for a 3.5 percent annual pay rise. Even if this meagre increase, not enough to cover the rapidly rising cost of living in Sydney, is granted, the union will enforce cuts to ensure the overall wage bill of Sydney Trains and NSW Trains does not increase by more than 2.5 percent, as it did under the previous 2018 EA.

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.

Workers’ key demands in this dispute are over job security, particularly the use of casual and labour-hire workers and contractors, as well as the ever-present threat of privatisation. With the privatisation of Sydney’s bus network almost complete, rail is the last mode of public transport that (mostly) remains in public hands.

The opening of the Sydney Metro Northwest rapid transit line in 2019 and the current construction of the Sydney Metro City and Southwest line make clear that future expansion of the city’s rail network will involve privately-owned and operated driverless trains and a major assault on jobs.

Workers are also concerned about the introduction of the New Intercity Fleet, a set of trains explicitly designed for driver-only operation, which will allow the role of guards to be eliminated. The introduction of this fleet is currently being prevented by drivers who refuse to man the trains because of their concerns over safety and job security. In the current negotiations, TfNSW has sought to remove clauses in the current EA that have so far prevented the agency from pressing the fleet into service despite the objection of drivers.

The changes TfNSW is seeking in the new EA, and their response to the workers’ log of claims, make clear that the current negotiations are intended to prepare the way for sweeping restructuring and privatisation.

The employer has rejected demands for a guarantee in the new EA that workers’ base conditions will be retained if they are transferred to a private company, permanent conversion for contractors after three months service, and a demand that: “Any employee affected by a restructure or workplace change will be given priority for positions in the new structure.” TfNSW is also seeking to slash redundancy payments from a maximum of 64 weeks’ pay to 12 weeks.

Tuesday's industrial action took place at the same time as a strike by around 50,000 NSW public school teachers—their first walkout in 10 years—as well as the second of two consecutive 24-hour stoppages by Sydney bus drivers, in the inner west on Monday and the southwest on Tuesday.

This reflects mounting anger among workers, especially those classified as “essential frontline workers” during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these workers have been publicly praised for their service over the past 20 months, continuing to work despite the risk to their health and lives, their efforts have been rewarded with attacks on their pay and conditions.

Throughout the pandemic, the unions have played a leading role in enforcing the demands of corporations and government for business and profit-making to carry on as usual, and public transport workers, as well as teachers, have found themselves at the centre of this back-to-work drive.

Genuine concerns of workers over the danger of COVID-19 have been repeatedly suppressed by the unions. In August last year, the RTBU called off a planned strike of drivers in three Sydney regions against overcrowded buses and the absence of a requirement for passengers to wear masks.

In September last year, the RTBU opposed the introduction of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination of transport workers, arguing that regular PCR tests for workers who lived in “hotspots” was sufficient and stating: “Ultimately, the decision of when to be vaccinated is a personal one, and the beliefs that underpin that decision are also personal.”

The concurrent strike of Sydney train and bus drivers on Tuesday increased the impact of the actions, especially with the inner west light rail network currently suspended due to a manufacturing defect. However, this effect was minimised by the decision of the RTBU, which represents most bus drivers in Region 6, for workers there to strike on Monday, meaning only the smaller Region 3, where workers are represented by the Transport Workers Union (TWU), was on strike on Tuesday.

While the RTBU postures as an opponent of privatisation, it has actively collaborated, along with the Labor Party, in the decimation of the NSW public transport sector over the last decade. Both Labor and the unions have falsely claimed that privatisation is an

“ideological obsession” held only by Liberal-National governments, when in fact it is the product of a pro-business program shared by Labor.

In fact, between 1995 and 2011, the NSW Labor government spearheaded the corporatisation of rail assets, the closure of maintenance workshops and the slashing of thousands of jobs. In addition, Labor was responsible for the sell-off of the state’s electricity distribution network.

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.

The present debacle around Sydney’s light rail and ferry services makes clear that the endless cost-cutting and privatisation agenda of Labor and Liberal-National governments alike is not just an assault on workers whose jobs are directly affected, but on the entire working class, which, in the interest of corporate profits, is being denied a reliable, safe and efficient public transport system.

As such, rail and bus drivers, and workers throughout the transport industry, must fight for a broader mobilisation of the working class based on 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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