

Australian state government locks out Sydney rail workers, accusing them of “terrorist-like activity”

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In a highly aggressive move, the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National Coalition government this morning locked out thousands of rail staff who operate the Sydney train network, as well as some workers on intercity services between Sydney and regional centres.

The lockout has been accompanied by a deluge of lies and denunciations of the workers by the NSW and federal Coalition governments. NSW government ministers have even accused rail workers of holding a “strike.”

This is a sham. In reality, the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), which covers the staff, has done everything it can for months to neuter widespread opposition among workers to a regressive enterprise agreement (EA) that attacks their wages and conditions and clears the way for further privatisation.

The union has continuously appealed to the government for collaboration and cloistered with it in backroom talks and limited the dispute to token industrial action. This was to continue today, as it has for weeks, with workers maintaining an “altered working ban,” under which they would only carry out their allocated shifts without changes. The ban would be protected under industrial laws.

When the workers arrived to work this morning, management told them that the entire Sydney rail network had been shut down for the day. Transport for NSW, the corporatised government agency responsible for the system, claimed the decision had been taken to ensure “safety.” It provided no explanation as to how workers limiting themselves to their allocated duties would jeopardise anyone’s wellbeing.

In other words, the lockout is a complete provocation, demonstrated by the hysterical and threatening statements that have accompanied it.

NSW Transport Minister David Elliot accused the rail workers of “hijacking the city.” A former police and counter-terrorism minister, he declared: “I think we’re going to have a large standoff because they can’t use the city’s transport

system for some sort of terrorist-like activity.”

Elliot’s comment is a warning, not only to rail staff, but the working class as a whole. The attempt to equate industrial action with terrorism recalls the situation that prevails in out-and-out dictatorships and police-states.

As Australian governments imposed batteries of anti-democratic laws after 2001, on the pretext of the “war on terror,” the Socialist Equality Party warned that the measures will be directed against workers, especially as social tensions mount. Elliot’s statement underscores the correctness of that assessment.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison immediately joined the demonisation of the workers, indicating that the provocation was coordinated with the federal government. He linked the dispute to his government’s drive to force workers to stay on the job during the pandemic and fully “reopen” via the profit-driven “live with the virus” program.

“We’ve had nurses, we’ve had teachers, we’ve had police officers and everyone working hard through the pandemic, and we’ve got international arrivals opening up today and the union’s welcome to them will be a train strike,” Morrison declared. Putting aside the false claims of a strike, the border reopening is a centrepiece of the lifting of all remaining COVID-19 safety restrictions.

Workers have “worked hard” throughout the pandemic because they have been compelled to by the governments and, above all, the trade unions. This agenda is encountering mounting opposition. NSW nurses took their first statewide strike last Tuesday against unsafe staffing ratios, intolerable conditions including long hours, and the deluging of the hospitals as a result of the official pandemic policies.

The pro-business NSW Industrial Relations Commission banned the nurses’ stoppage on the completely false basis that it would constitute a “threat to public health and safety.” NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet threatened to prosecute nurses for defying that ruling.

Morrison boasted that his government had “stared down”

threats of industrial action in the ports, with the Maritime Union of Australia preventing strikes and even limited work bans.

“They backed off. That’s what our government will do when it’s falling into our areas of responsibility, and I’ve no doubt the NSW government will take a strong stand as well,” Morrison declared. Morrison warned of the consequences of unions thinking “they’ve got the power.” He said: “We’ve seen it before from our waterfront to now our trains.”

The comments are particularly striking because as far as the unions are concerned, they are a complete inversion of reality. Throughout the pandemic, the unions have taken their collaboration with governments and employers to new levels. They have done everything they can to keep workers on the job—whatever the threat to safety—enforced cuts to conditions on the pretext of the pandemic and suppressed any organised opposition.

In reality, Morrison and Elliot are not referring to the unions or their leaderships but to workers themselves. These governments fear a breakout of working-class struggles in defiance of the old industrial mechanisms, including the unions.

The role of the unions is sharply evident in the rail dispute. RTBU NSW secretary Alex Classens held talks with the state government on Saturday, at which he agreed to end overtime bans and other limited action without any apparent concessions.

Classens, who is a leading member of the big business Labor Party in NSW, complained he was not told there would be a lockout if the “altered work ban” were maintained. He responded to Elliot’s hysterical attacks by publicly begging the minister for further talks. More hearings at the Fair Work Commission, the pro-business industrial tribunal established by Labor governments with the support of the unions, are scheduled for today.

The dispute, which has dragged on for months, centres on a series of changes Transport for NSW is demanding in the new agreement.

Some relate to the introduction of a New Intercity Fleet—trains explicitly designed for driver-only operation that could be used to eliminate guard roles. Drivers are preventing the introduction of this fleet by refusing to man the trains because of safety and job security concerns. In the negotiations, Transport for NSW has sought to remove clauses in the current EA that have so far prevented the agency from pressing the fleet into service despite the drivers’ objections.

The union has called for a 3.5 percent per annum pay rise, marginally above an offer of 2.5 percent, but less than the soaring cost of living. In a statement today, the RTBU said

its main aims were “a commitment that no train services or lines will be lost in the event of privatisation;” “a guarantee that any changes to our services will leave them as safe or safer, and “a commitment to maintaining the existing level of hygiene using good, fulltime jobs.”

In other words, the union accepts further restructuring and privatisation, including the introduction of the inter-city fleet, but wants several worthless “guarantees” that it can use to impose a sellout deal upon its members. While holding some 30 backroom meetings with the government over the past six months, the RTBU has called partial and sporadic industrial action to let off steam. Workers have been isolated, and everything has been done to ensure minimal disruption.

For decades, the union has enforced the corporatisation and privatisation of the transport system. In 2014, it imposed a NSW rail EA that abolished clauses that had been in every previous agreement over two decades, prohibiting forced redundancies and mandating that any workers redeployed must maintain their original salary.

In 2018, the RTBU shut down a planned statewide strike and then enforced an agreement. That deal provided for a crackdown on sick leave, and expanded disciplinary measures, including, in some cases, forcing workers onto leave without pay. The agreement facilitated the use and expansion of contract and casual labour throughout the NSW train network. It also allowed for forced redundancies.

The union claimed the 2018 agreement had been ratified by little over 50 percent of workers. Hundreds said they would quit the RTBU.

The government offensive against rail workers is bound up with the “reopening” drive amid the continuing pandemic, and the stepped-up pro-business restructuring that the ruling elite insists must accompany it.

The record demonstrates that workers cannot fight these attacks through the unions, which function as an arm of government, serving the interests of a privileged officialdom. Rail staff should form their own independent rank-and-file committees to organise a genuine industrial and political fightback. This must involve a turn to other sections of workers, throughout transport and more broadly.



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