

Widespread anger over Australian state government's provocative shutdown of Sydney rail network

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Rail staff and many other workers have expressed their hostility to the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government's shutdown of the Sydney rail network yesterday. The action has been rightly condemned on social media as a political provocation against rail workers aimed at demonising them along with any, even extremely limited, industrial action.

Around 2 a.m. yesterday (Monday) morning, rail workers received an email from Transport for NSW, informing them that the Sydney train network and a number of inter-city services would not be operating for the day. Some workers had already arrived at work when they were informed.

Then the workers were met with a prepared official blitzkrieg. Senior NSW Liberal-National Coalition ministers, together with their federal colleague Prime Minister Scott Morrison had secured slots on early morning talkback radio shows.

They told tales of Sydney being paralysed by a rail strike. The train crews, NSW Transport Minister David Elliot declared, were "hijacking the city" in a "terrorist-like activity." They were showing their contempt for people trying to get to work and go about their business, Morrison and NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet insisted.

Photos on social media, meanwhile, showed large groups of rail workers, calmly waiting at train stations to see if the state government would allow them to work.

By mid-afternoon, Perrottet and Transport for NSW officials "clarified" that the issue was not a mass strike. Instead, low-level industrial action, as part of a protracted dispute for a new enterprise agreement (EA), would jeopardise safety. The action consisted of workers undertaking to only fulfil their scheduled duties unless there was an emergency. At a press conference, Perrottet was unable to explain whose safety would be at risk or why.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), which Perrottet accused of great militancy, spent the day publicly begging the government for a resumption of backroom talks and insisting that they had not called a strike and were not planning to. The union's NSW rail division, headed by right-wing Labor Party operative Alex Claassens, has a decades-long record of imposing attacks on pay and conditions, including in the face of

widespread opposition from workers.

In other words, the shutdown was entirely manufactured by the government. What Perrottet and Elliot accused workers of doing—crashing Sydney's public transport system without warning—they had done themselves. This action had many of the characteristics of a lockout.

Completing the farcical picture, however, workers, as well as the RTBU, have stated that they were paid as per normal for the day, provided they signed on to work. The government was clearly fearful that a full-scale lockout, with pay withheld, could have provoked real mass strikes, not those made up by Perrottet and his colleagues.

The peculiar character of the shutdown demonstrates that it was political. The clear aim was to present any industrial action by workers, no matter how limited, as an illegitimate attack on the functioning of society and the general public.

This was carried out in the context of widespread fears within the ruling elite of mounting social and political opposition in the working class. Despite the unions continuing to enforce sub-inflationary pay "rises" in EA's, there are frequent warnings in the financial press that a wage push by workers is inevitable. Official inflation in Australia has reached 3.5 percent for the first time in years, but the cost of a number of essentials is increasing by more than double that.

There is also widespread anger over the "let it rip" pandemic policies of the past two months, which have resulted in a massive Omicron surge. The shutdown was timed for the day that international borders were fully reopened, as part of the lifting of the handful of restrictions that remain.

Perrottet and Morrison condemned the train drivers for supposedly disrupting this new stage in the policy of forcing the population to "live with the virus" so that full corporate activities can resume. The clear message was that in this new "reopened" society, and amid a turn to "economic recovery," any action by workers is impermissible.

Public sector workers are on the frontlines. In NSW, as in a number of other states, they have been subjected to a decade-long wage cap that limits annual pay increases to 2.5 percent. They have been forced to work throughout the pandemic, above

all by the unions, often in dangerous conditions.

The ruling class agenda is encountering growing opposition. Last week NSW nurses held their first statewide strike since 2013 over meagre pay and intolerable conditions, greatly exacerbated by the pandemic. They did so in defiance of a ban by the Industrial Relations Commission and threats of prosecution from the Perrottet government.

The NSW government, with its rail shutdown, was asserting that it would be able to “stare down” the working class, a phrase used by Prime Minister Morrison yesterday. They are pitching to sections of the corporate elite doubtful that the widely-discredited unions will be able to contain the class struggle despite their best efforts.

The aggressive posturing is also bound up with the deepening crisis of the NSW and federal Liberal-National governments, caused by widespread popular opposition. They have adopted an increasingly militarist and authoritarian posture.

Labor and the unions are also making an appeal to the ruling elite, based on their decades-long record of suppressing any movement of the working class and imposing the dictates of big business.

At the federal level, Labor is harkening back to the years of the Hawke-Keating governments, which formed a tripartite alliance with the unions and business to smash up the existing workers’ movement, deregulate the economy and destroy or privatise whole sections of industry. NSW Labor leaders responded to yesterday’s shutdown by condemning the government for “playing politics” and behaving “irresponsibly.”

These issues are present in the rail dispute. The RTBU has been entrenched in backroom negotiations with the government for months. It has limited industrial action to token work bans and a handful of strikes.

The union is clearly signalling that it is willing to enforce the dictates of the government and transport management.

One of the key issues in the dispute is the introduction of a new inter-city fleet of trains designed for driver-only operation. Workers have stated that this will be the mechanism for eliminating guard roles, and could be used for the further privatisation of the network.

Since February 9, the RTBU has wound back several work bans on the grounds of a worthless guarantee from the government that trains will not be operated without guards, even though that is a key purpose of the new fleet. They have also touted “A fully transparent risk-assessment process for all new trains.” The union has toned down its posturing against further privatisation, requesting only “a commitment that no train services or lines will be lost in the event of privatisation.”

On wages, the union is asking for an annual increase of just 3.5 percent, and accepts that the one percent above the public sector wage cap will be made up for by greater “productivity.”

On Saturday, the union cancelled several industrial actions, including an “overtime ban.” It claimed the government had

been seeking forced arbitration of the agreement in the pro-business Fair Work Commission. That it was dissuaded from taking this step was another in a series of mythical “wins.”

There is considerable opposition to the union leadership. A worker responded to a post on the RTBU NSW Facebook page announcing Saturday’s “victory” by commenting: “Absolutely pathetic. Every bow down action by the upper echelon management of this union is so disheartening for the members. What are we paying our fees for if the bargaining team give in each time?”

The union cancellation of a number of bans clearly emboldened the government to launch its provocative shutdown. As in every single EA of the last decade, the union is dragging on the dispute and preventing any unified mobilisation of workers, to create the conditions for a sell-out. The situation train staff already confront, including drivers frequently being forced to work ten consecutive days with substantial overtime, is the direct consequence of previous EAs. So is the widespread use of casual and contract labour.

Workers can only fight for their interests through a break with the RTBU, which functions as an industrial and political police force of management, and advances the interests of its privileged officialdom. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required, to unite workers throughout the sector and more broadly in a genuine industrial and political fightback.

Monday’s provocation demonstrates the need for a broader political movement of the working class, which rejects the official demands for endless cuts to wages and conditions as well as the homicidal, pro-business pandemic policies. It must be directed against all the governments and official parties, and the capitalist system they defend.



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