

Australia: Rail union saves NSW government after provocation backfires

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23 February 2022

As further details emerge revealing Monday's shutdown of Sydney's rail network to have been a political provocation against workers, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has stepped in to save the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government from a crisis of its own making.

Late Sunday night, Transport for NSW (TfNSW) made the decision to completely shut down the city's rail network on Monday in response to extremely limited protected industrial action called by the RTBU. The call was ostensibly made on the basis of a risk assessment that warned the network would be "heavily congested," possibly resulting in overcrowding at inner-city stations.

The existence of this document and the time of its creation is highly dubious. While the *Australian* claims to have seen it, as of 3 p.m. yesterday, Transport Minister David Elliott said he had only been sent "briefing notes." Yesterday morning an RTBU subpoena for the risk assessment and accompanying metadata including the document's timestamp was followed in less than an hour by the NSW government withdrawing its Fair Work Commission (FWC) case against the workers.

RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens declared the withdrawal of the FWC application a "massive win for members." Claassens downplayed the extraordinary act of aggression towards rail workers and the entire working class, characterising the effective lockout as "a huge dummy spit."

While noting that the episode had "shown the weakness in the government," the union vowed to work with it to return to full service by next Monday. Limited services are proceeding this week.

Monday's shutdown was an attempt by the Perrottet government to send a message to the working class that no industrial action, however limited, would be tolerated. This attempted manoeuvre backfired, as it quickly became apparent to stranded commuters and the broader public

that workers had nothing to do with the cancellation of train services. With the government caught out and beating a swift retreat, Claassens and the RTBU bureaucracy swept in to restore services and protect Perrottet and Elliott from growing public anger.

In the process, the union is collaborating closely with a government that only a few days ago locked out its members, lied that they were responsible for the shutdown and slandered them as terrorists.

This is consistent with the union's actions throughout a current enterprise agreement (EA) dispute and for years prior. In recent months, the RTBU has repeatedly appealed to the government for collaboration, negotiated in backroom talks and called only limited industrial action, designed to minimise disruption.

The transport minister publicly expressed his gratitude for the union rescue in a press conference yesterday afternoon. Elliott said he was "delighted" with the outcome of a "constructive" meeting with the union, offering his "congratulations and thanks to Alex."

His attitude to the workers, however, remained hostile. Elliott refused to apologise for his statement on Monday that rail workers were "hijacking the city" in a "terrorist-like activity," claiming he was "reflecting the anger of the electorate."

Still attempting to divert blame for the transport chaos, Elliott repeatedly referred to the government-instigated shutdown as a "strike" and, when corrected by reporters, insisted "it was industrial action, there's no doubt about that."

Elliott declared the decision to withdraw the FWC case was made "in the interests of not only transparency but goodwill." As a result, Elliott said, the union had agreed to "commence rewriting the enterprise agreement which expired in May last year."

In other words, as the shutdown unravelled as a spectacularly unpopular political manoeuvre and the

government was on the back foot, the RTBU jumped at the chance to go back into closed-door talks with the transport minister.

As in previous EA negotiations, the RTBU is doing everything it can to prepare a sell-out. As Claassens proclaimed on Monday, in the more than eight months since the last EA expired, the union has held just two strikes, one of four hours and one of eight hours, overnight. Despite the support of members, industrial action has been mostly confined to limited bans and token stunts.

On February 9, the union called off industrial action by train signallers on the basis of a meaningless promise that New Intercity Fleet trains will not run without guards, although they were explicitly designed for driver-only operation.

The RTBU is asking for an annual wage increase of just 3.5 percent—the current rate of inflation—and will, as in previous EAs, accept cuts to make up the difference between the meagre claim and the 2.5 percent wage cap.

In 2018, the union shut down a planned statewide strike and enforced an EA that cracked down on sick leave, expanded disciplinary measures, facilitated the growing use of contract and casual labour and provided for forced redundancies.

The rail workers' dispute takes place in a broader context of mounting unrest in the working class amid rapidly increasing cost of living pressures. This has emerged particularly in the NSW public sector, where workers have been subjected to a punitive 2.5 percent wage cap for more than a decade. With official inflation at 3.5 percent, the price of essential goods and services rising even more quickly, and class tensions inflamed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling class fear a rebellion against the unions' continued efforts to contain the class struggle.

Elliott claimed the unions had “published their battle plan yesterday on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*.” The fact is, while Unions NSW Secretary Mark Morey told the Murdoch paper there would be strikes “for as long as the wage cap remains,” this was expressed not as a threat, but as an appeal to the government for assistance in bringing workers to order.

Morey said “Dominic Perrottet and [NSW Treasurer] Matt Kean can end all of this very quickly by allowing nurses, paramedics, teachers and other pandemic heroes to bargain for a fair wage rise.”

In other words, the peak union body in NSW is warning the government that it may not be able to suppress

workers' opposition to continued cuts unless token concessions are made, including wage increases marginally above the 2.5 percent pay cap. In the rail dispute, the RTBU is requesting just 3.5 percent per annum. Non-discretionary inflation has already surpassed 4 percent.

Morey wrote in the same issue of the *Telegraph*: “It’s time for the NSW government to let the moths out of its wallet. The next state budget is the perfect opportunity.”

Along with a plea to the right-wing NSW government for even closer collaboration with the unions, this is an attempt to sow bankrupt illusions among workers. The state governments have vastly expanded their debts over the past two years of the pandemic, primarily as a result of massive handouts to big business and the banks. They are now determined to make the working class pay. That’s why rail workers and other key public sector employers are facing stepped-up attacks on their wages and conditions.

The RTBU’s response to the Sydney rail shutdown demonstrates that the unions are functioning as the enforcers of this ruling class program. The unions are an industrial and political police force that has enforced the dictates of finance capital for decades. They do not advance the interests of workers, but of their privileged executives who are tied by a thousand strings to business and the official political parties.

The rail shutdown has underscored the need for workers to take matters into their own hands. New organisations of struggle must be formed, including rank-and-file committees independent of the corporatised unions. These must unite the various sections of workers entering into struggle, including rail staff, nurses and teachers, in a genuine industrial and political counter-offensive against the government, Labor and the capitalist system they defend.



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