

Australia: Lessons of the 2018 union sell-out of NSW rail workers

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While New South Wales (NSW) Premier Dominic Perrottet and Transport Minister David Elliott continue to deny any role in the shutdown of the Sydney rail network on Monday, documents have been released revealing that plans to cancel all trains for two weeks were finalised on February 16.

The attempted provocation by the NSW government, with the backing of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, was a marked escalation of the assault on the working class. The extraordinary episode, clearly in part a retaliation for the February 15 NSW nurses' strike, made clear that the ruling elite will not tolerate even the most limited industrial action.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union's immediate return to backroom negotiations with the transport minister, days after he accused workers of carrying out "terrorist-like activity," is a warning to workers. The union is engaged in secret collaboration with a government that sought to fit rail staff up less than a week ago, and no doubt has plans for further attacks.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) leadership is not only suppressing a fightback against the rail shutdown provocation. It is preparing the way for a further management onslaught and is clearly seeking to shut down the dispute and force through yet another sell-out.

To combat this operation, and fight for pay improvements, job security and against privatisation, workers must examine the lessons of the experiences through which they have passed. This includes the RTBU's betrayal of workers in the negotiations of the last enterprise agreement (EA).

In 2018, the RTBU rammed through a regressive deal for Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workers in the face of substantial opposition. In exchange for a meagre 3 percent per annum wage rise, workers were forced to accept numerous attacks on their conditions, including increased scrutiny of sick leave, reduced notice periods for redundancies, and consolidation (I.e., job cuts) of signalling operations.

This was carried out through by a campaign of isolation and suppression engineered to wear workers down in a drawn-out series of toothless sporadic work bans until they begrudgingly accepted a rotten union-management deal.

In January 2018, 84 percent of Sydney Trains and 73 percent of NSW Trains voted in favour of protected industrial action.

The workers called for a 6 percent pay rise and the urgent hiring of additional workers to combat constant demands for overtime. Drivers told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were regularly working shifts of ten hours or longer, up to 12 days in a row.

Liberal-National Transport Minister Andrew Constance declared he would "stare down" the workers, insisting the government would not budge from the Labour Expenses cap, which limits annual public sector wage increases to 2.5 percent unless other spending cuts are made. The RTBU was the first union to enforce the punitive cap after it was introduced by the Labor government in 2008.

In 2018, the RTBU prevented a fight against the wage cap, despite the demands of workers. The union's NSW Secretary Alex Claassens described the 6 percent figure as "a bit out there." NSW Labor Party opposition leader Luke Foley agreed, saying it was "too much."

Workers were also concerned about job security, under conditions of ongoing restructuring and preparations for privatisation, begun under the state Labor government in the 1990s and sharpened in the 2014 EA rammed through by the RTBU.

Since 2014, the number of people employed by Sydney Trains, including a growing number of casual and part-time workers, has grown by just 14 percent, while passenger volume has increased by 34 percent. Over the same period the number of senior executives has almost doubled, from 81 to 156.

In response to the massive vote for industrial action, in mid-January the union announced an indefinite overtime ban starting January 25 and a 24-hour strike on January 29. It was clear from the outset that the union would do everything it could to prevent these actions from going ahead, and would instead attempt to ram through a sellout deal based on a few token concessions.

By announcing the strike two weeks in advance, the union knowingly invited a flurry of denunciation from government and the corporate press, stepping up pressure on workers to sign on to the rotten deal. The timing of the proposed strike, on the first day of the school year, was a calculated move to create the conditions for it to be called off, on the grounds that it would inconvenience passengers.

In the week before the proposed industrial action, the union held further backroom talks with management and the transport minister, aimed at shutting down the strike. Claassens hailed Constance for his “respectful” attitude and said he was committed to “try to resolve this mess, as we all are.”

On January 24, the union sent workers a text message asking if they would abandon the stoppage on the basis of a revised EA offer from Sydney Trains. Workers were not sent the proposed agreement but were asked to vote on the basis of six dot points, deliberately crafted to promote a meagre wage rise and sign-on bonus and conceal the details of attacks on conditions. In an indication of workers hostility and suspicion toward the deal and the union, just 5.9 percent of workers who responded to the text message voted to call off the strike.

The following day, the Fair Work Commission (FWC) banned the January 29 strike and all other industrial action, including the overtime ban and the wearing of union badges. Claassens made clear the RTBU would enforce the anti-worker tribunal’s decision, stating the union would “always abide by Fair Work Commission rulings.”

The RTBU, along with all Australian unions, consistently falls back on the anti-democratic rulings of the FWC as the basis to shut down strikes even when they have been overwhelmingly endorsed by its members. The reality is, the unions backed the Rudd Labor government’s introduction of “Fair Work” in 2009 and have enforced it ever since. The draconian legislation bans strikes outside of “bargaining periods” and includes sweeping provisions for even “protected” industrial action to be banned on the pretext that it would harm the economy or public welfare. It was on this basis that the 2018 rail workers’ strike was banned.

In the weeks following the cancelled strike, the RTBU repeatedly put essentially unchanged union-management offers in front of workers. No mass meetings were held and the proposed EAs were never given to workers to examine and discuss.

The RTBU claimed it was not endorsing either a yes or no vote, but members were warned a no vote would prolong the wage freeze. Claassens and other union officials publicly claimed the deal was “outstanding” and “the best they were going to get.”

By the end of March, the union was able to push through the sell-out deal with the narrowest of margins. Of those who returned ballots, just 52.8 percent of Sydney Trains workers, and 50.8 percent of NSW Trains workers, voted “yes.” As many as 3,000 workers across the state did not vote.

Workers’ anger and hostility toward the RTBU was such that the union shut down comments on its Facebook page in January. Many stated that they would resign.

But the experience in 2018, like many before and since, demonstrates that anger and opposition to the union treachery is not enough. Absent alternative organisations and a new perspective, the union is able to wear workers down and impose

the dictates of management.

The lesson is that a new strategy is required. The RTBU plays the role it does, not simply because of the proclivities of individual leaders.

Rather, the unions have been transformed over the past forty years and are no longer workers’ organisations in any sense of the term. Taking their pro-capitalist and nationalist program to its logical conclusion, they no longer fight for even minor gains for workers. Instead, they fight to impose the dictates of management and finance capital for endless cuts to wages and continuous pro-business restructuring.

New organisations of struggle are required, including independent rank-and-file committees, uniting all rail staff. These are the only means by which workers can democratically discuss the issues they face, free from the censorship of the RTBU bureaucrats, and plan a genuine industrial and political struggle against the government and transport management.

The angry popular reaction to the rail shutdown demonstrates that there is widespread support for train workers among working people. Rail staff can make a powerful appeal to other public sector workers, including nurses and teachers, who have faced decades of funding cuts at the hands of Labor and Liberal-National governments and have recently carried out mass strikes for the first time in years.

An organised mobilisation of these sections of worker could begin a serious counter-offensive against the pay cap, the continuing assault on permanent jobs and the drive to privatisation in these sectors and more broadly.

Above all, an alternative perspective is required. The endless restructuring and attacks can only be ended through the establishment of a workers’ government. It would institute socialist policies, including placing all mass transport under genuine public ownership and democratic workers’ control, along with the major banks and corporations. The train system must be run to meet the needs of rail staff and the working class as a whole, not the austerity demands of management and big business.

Contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss this perspective.



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