

# Australia: Sydney rail shutdown planned by multiple government departments

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Revelations over the past week have demonstrated that the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government knew of and authorised a shutdown of the entire Sydney rail system on February 21. The provocation amounted to a lockout, with workers prevented from performing their duties and falsely accused by government ministers of having orchestrated the transport chaos through limited industrial action.

The government, the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and Transport for NSW (TfNSW) are all seeking to bury any discussion of the rail shutdown. The move, which was intended to intimidate rail staff and to incite the public against them, backfired spectacularly with widespread anger over the provocation.

The union has responded by ending all remaining industrial action and returning to backroom talks with the government aimed at stitching up yet another sell-out deal in bargaining for a new enterprise agreement. Government ministers, who accused rail staff of taking “terrorist-like action” on February 21, have sought to diffuse the crisis by claiming the shutdown was nothing to do with them.

Testimony and documents presented to NSW budget estimates committee hearings last week make clear that this is a lie. The provocative move against rail workers and commuters was widely discussed in the hours and days before it took place.

TfNSW Secretary Rob Sharp told budget estimates on Friday that the final decision to shut down the network was made in a meeting held between 9:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. on February 20.

According to Sharp, TfNSW Deputy Secretary Megan Bourke-O’Neil briefed NSW Transport Minister David Elliott’s chief of staff by 10:43 p.m., and received confirmation that the transport minister agreed with the shutdown. Sharp placed Bourke-O’Neil on three weeks’ “directed leave” on February 28, the day before she was

due to appear before a budget estimates hearing.

At 10:51 p.m., Elliott’s chief of staff texted the minister and other colleagues warning of “massive disruption” the following morning. Sharp texted Department of Premier and Cabinet Secretary Michael Coutts-Trotter at about 11:50 p.m. advising of the shutdown.

The official line is that Elliott did not construe a “massive disruption” to the rail network in Australia’s largest city as anything that should concern the NSW transport minister, while Coutts-Trotter was asleep and did not pass the message along to Premier Dominic Perrottet. Certainly this story is extremely dubious, but the precise chronology of events on February 20 is something of a sideshow to an attack on workers that was clearly prepared days before.

Two days prior to the lockout, the Fair Work Commission (FWC) heard an application by TfNSW for protected industrial action to be terminated. In accordance with the FWC ruling, the RTBU agreed to call off two other planned industrial actions, train crew working only to their “master roster,” and an overtime ban, while an “altered working” ban was allowed to proceed.

In preparation for this hearing, TfNSW prepared a risk assessment, which concluded that it would be necessary to shut down the entire Sydney rail network for two weeks if the protected industrial action was allowed to continue. This document was completed on February 16.

The Department of Education also made a submission to the FWC hearing “on the impact of potential rail disruption,” NSW Education Secretary Georgina Harrison told budget estimates last Wednesday. Harrison claimed she had not reported the request for this submission to the education minister. An estimated 55,000 students were affected by the shutdown.

The NSW government’s chief economist also provided modelling on the economic impact of a two-week shutdown, while NSW Health gave evidence on the

consequences for hospitals.

Employee Relations Minister Damien Tudehope told budget estimates on Friday he knew a shutdown was possible on Thursday February 17. Despite this, Tudehope on February 21 accused rail workers of “industrial bastardry of the worst form,” as part of a concerted effort by the NSW and federal government to claim the cancellation of all train services was the result of a strike.

While the NSW government is unquestionably in a state of profound crisis, it is inconceivable that these preparations, involving numerous departments, took place without the involvement of the premier and transport minister.

The extraordinary shutdown can only be understood in the broader context of official concerns over growing opposition in the working class. Just six days prior to the rail lockout, tens of thousands of public hospital nurses walked off the job in defiance of a ruling by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission banning the strike.

Fearful that a direct reprisal against the nurses would risk igniting a powder keg of working-class anger, the NSW government attacked rail workers partly as a warning to the entire working class that no industrial action, however limited, would be tolerated. The fact that this manoeuvre backfired so spectacularly is an example of the extent of popular opposition.

It is under these conditions that the RTBU immediately came to the government’s rescue, ensuring service resumed and the dispute was once again confined to backroom union-management talks.

On February 21, while Elliott slandered rail workers, RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens was calling on him to “come to the table.” The following day, Elliott offered his “congratulations and thanks to Alex” and said he was “delighted” with the outcome of a meeting with the union.

On February 26, in a piece published in the *Daily Telegraph*, Claassens called on Elliott and Perrottet to “sit down with the list of claims workers gave them eight months ago and start making some offers to resolve them.”

In other words, Claassens was issuing a clear and public promise to suppress any further opposition from workers and ram through a sell-out deal based on one or two minor concessions.

Notwithstanding the political embarrassment, TfNSW and the Perrottet government in fact achieved precisely what they set out to do. The manoeuvre was aimed at shutting down industrial action on the railways and

getting back to the business of imposing a regressive enterprise agreement, which is exactly what the union is seeking to deliver.

This is in line with the role played by the RTBU for decades. In one enterprise agreement after another, the RTBU has enforced job cuts, increased casualisation, and the punitive 2.5 percent per annum wage cap. This is all part of a drive towards privatisation which the union has facilitated for every other mode of transport in NSW.

Conscious of workers’ opposition to the deepening assault, the RTBU confines disputes to long and demoralising campaigns of limited work bans designed to cause minimal disruption. This is aimed at wearing workers down until they are forced to accept a rotten deal cooked up in union-management talks.

This is not the result of tactical errors or solely of malevolent individuals within the bureaucracy. The fact is, the unions are no longer workers’ organisations in any way, having been transformed since the 1980s into pro-business enforcers of management demands.

Rail workers must break with the union and form their own organisations of struggle; independent rank-and-file committees. Through these committees, workers must appeal to their counterparts across the transport industry and the entire working class to mount a serious political fight against the continuing assault on jobs, pay and conditions and to defeat any sell-out agreement.

More broadly, the rail shutdown has underscored the need for a political movement of the working class uniting transport staff with nurses and other public sector employees as well as workers throughout the private sector. Such a movement must be directed against the entire political establishment including Labor, the unions and the capitalist system which subordinates everything to the profit dictates of the corporate elite.



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