Australian rail union brokers peace deal with NSW government

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Less than a month after the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government shut down Sydney's rail network, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has agreed to ask its members to implement a six-week ban on industrial action.

Since Monday, union officials have carried out dozens of small workplace meetings designed to limit open discussion among workers and suppress opposition to the union-government peace deal.

Following these meetings, the RTBU also plans to call off limited work bans that only began this week and had been planned since March 11. These include indefinite bans on working with contractors and on undertaking work prohibited through the industrial action of another union, as well as two-week bans on transpositions, foreign depot work, altered work and changes to the master roster.

The RTBU's commitment to drop these bans is a further example of the role the union has played since the shutdown, swooping in to rescue the government from a political crisis of its own making.

In response to similar bans that were set to begin on February 21, Transport for NSW (TfNSW) ordered the cancellation of all train service in Sydney, Australia's largest city. While Transport Minister David Elliott and NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet denied responsibility, documents and testimony have since emerged that made clear the shutdown had been planned at the highest levels of government over several weeks.

The NSW government faced widespread anger from the public over what was quickly revealed as a deliberate move to sabotage the rail network in a provocative attack on rail workers. Yet with the authorities on the back foot, the RTBU swiftly stepped in to restore service and resume backroom negotiations.

Last Tuesday, RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens offered the state government an easy way to avoid any further industrial action on the railways. He said: "As soon as the government announces a fare-free day on Friday, we're going to withdraw [planned industrial action]."

Elliott quickly made clear that this offer was highly favourable to the government, promising fare-free Fridays for a year in exchange for a ban on industrial action over that time.

In other words, the union has abandoned any pretence that the limited work bans it has announced are directed against the assault on wages and conditions in the EA negotiations. Instead, the union has issued the government a promise to suppress workers' opposition to the rotten deal in exchange for a cheap public relations exercise aimed at dampening hostility over the shutdown in the broader working class.

The union justified the strike ban on the basis of supposed agreement from the state government and TfNSW on a handful of workers' claims in ongoing enterprise agreement (EA) negotiations. These claims are primarily related to overtime rates and the incorporation of shift allowances into base pay.

Also supposedly agreed to is the retention of a clause requiring 28 days' notice of changes to the master roster and a maximum of four master roster changes per year. This clause was included in the 2018 EA with the stipulation that it would expire when the agreement was replaced.

The RTBU's no-strike promise makes clear that the union is preparing to wind up the dispute and ram through a sell-out deal that does nothing to resolve workers' major concerns over privatisation and moves to eliminate guards on the New Intercity Fleet.

All other modes of transport in the state, including ferries, buses and light rail, are now in the hands of

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private operators, after more than a decade of sell-offs carried out with the full collaboration of the RTBU and other transport unions.

The fully-automated Sydney Metro train network is also privately operated and is currently being expanded to replace sections of the existing rail network in the city's southwest. This demonstrates that the NSW government intends to further slash jobs for drivers, guards and other rail workers in the coming years.

The union is also silent on the question of pay, under conditions where rail workers are still subject to a 2.5 percent annual wage increase cap, well below the official inflation rate of 3.5 percent. The cost of basic items including housing, food and fuel, is rising even more rapidly.

Rail workers have not had a pay rise in almost two years, as the previous EA expired in April 2021 and TfNSW has not agreed to backdate the wage rise in the new agreement.

Under the public sector wage cap, even the union's earlier meagre demand for 3.5 percent annual increases will depend on cuts to spending in other areas, meaning jobs will be destroyed and conditions will be slashed. The RTBU, along with all other unions covering NSW public sector workers, has consistently enforced the cap since it was introduced by the then state Labor government in 2008.

NSW public sector workers now confront not just wage stagnation but substantial wage cuts in real terms. This has intensified longstanding anger and opposition.

In December last year, NSW teachers held a 24-hour strike for the first time in a decade, while nurses walked out last month, their first statewide strike since 2013. In both cases, workers defied bans issued by the pro-business NSW Industrial Relations Commission.

Despite a pledge by the NSW Teachers' Federation to ban strikes during term one, teachers have recently carried out isolated walk-outs and protests in opposition to massive understaffing exacerbated by rampant COVID-19 infection caused by the forced return to face-to-face teaching.

Nurses are voting this week on whether to hold a second statewide strike, making clear that a single walk-out was not enough to vent mounting pressure from workers as the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association had intended.

It was partially in response to these strikes that the Perrottet government launched its provocative assault on rail workers last month, as a warning to the broader working class that no industrial action, however limited, will be tolerated.

The RTBU peace deal makes clear that the union bureaucracies are doing everything they can to suppress the emerging struggles of the working class, and to ram through further regressive EAs.

Rail workers must reject the union's moves to shutdown industrial action and rescue the government. They should reach out to teachers, nurses and other workers to mount a unified struggle against the wage cap and all other attacks on jobs, pay and conditions.

This requires a conscious break with the RTBU and all the corporatised trade unions which function as industrial policemen to enforce the demands of management and serve the interests of a privileged bureaucracy.

Workers must form new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to take up a political fight against the capitalist system, and all of its representatives in the major political parties, unions and media. Only through a fight for a socialist perspective and workers' governments can critical public services, including transport, health and education, be operated to meet the needs of workers and the mass of the population.

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