

Australian union shuts down industrial action by Sydney rail workers

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Following what has been described by rail workers on social media as a “sham vote,” the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has shut down virtually all industrial action against Transport for New South Wales (TfNSW), the corporatised government agency responsible for public transport in the state.

RTBU officials last week carried out a “tour” of rail depots, holding dozens of small workplace meetings designed to prevent open discussion among workers. At most depots, only a single meeting was held, meaning many union members were unable to attend, raise opposition, or even vote on the proposal. Rather than conduct a democratic, verifiable, electronic or paper secret ballot, the union used informal “show of hands” votes at these depot meetings as evidence that workers supported its “peace deal” with the New South Wales (NSW) government.

Under the deal cooked up in closed-door negotiations with NSW Transport Minister David Elliott last week, the RTBU has withdrawn bans on overtime, altered work, and issuing or receiving transpositions—late changes to train schedules and stopping patterns—as well as a work to master roster action. The union has also agreed not to call any further action until April 29.

The union claims the decision to call off industrial action was a response to “important wins” in protracted negotiations for a new enterprise agreement (EA), in the form of a handful of promises from TfNSW, primarily relating to overtime and allowances.

There has been no discussion on wages, under conditions where rail workers, along with all NSW public sector workers, are subject to a 2.5 percent annual pay increase cap, far below the official inflation rate of 3.5 percent and the rapidly rising cost of living.

The “important wins” reported by the RTBU after last week’s meetings do nothing to address the major concerns of workers over safety and job security as TfNSW increasingly moves towards privatisation and the implementation of driver-only and driverless trains.

According to an update sent by the RTBU to members on

March 24, the NSW government has also agreed not to ask the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to tear up the previous EA as long as the strike ban is in place. The prospect of this course of action, which would force workers onto the minimum wage industrial award, slashing pay and conditions, has not previously been reported by the union.

Last month, the threat of EA termination in the FWC was used as a “gun to the head” of workers at Patrick Terminals to help the Maritime Union of Australia to overcome the opposition of workers and ram through a sell-out deal. Similar processes are underway at Svitzer and Qantas.

The RTBU’s deepening collaboration with the government, in the face of the escalating attack on workers, is a clear sign that the union is preparing to ram through a regressive deal on the railways. This raises the urgent need for rail workers to break with the union and form independent rank-and-file committees to take their struggle into their own hands.

The industrial action ban is also motivated by the RTBU’s full support for the government’s demand that the public return to offices, shops and hospitality venues in the central business districts of Sydney and Parramatta.

Since late last year, Premier Dominic Perrottet has been at the forefront of efforts by Australia’s state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, to insist workers must “live with the virus.” This demand for a return to “normal” and the removal of public health measures against COVID-19 just as the Omicron variant began to take hold in NSW set off a tsunami of infection, illness and death that is now beginning a resurgence.

In a national campaign led by Perrottet and Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews, teachers and school children, most of whom were not fully vaccinated, were herded back into face-to-face learning last month. The purpose of this was to ensure that parents could also be forced back to work in factories and offices.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Australia’s unions have enforced the demands of business that public health concerns must not be allowed to interrupt the flow of profit,

hailed the slashing of close contact isolation periods and suppressed any opposition by workers to the back-to-work drive.

The population has not been convinced by the propaganda barrage from governments and the corporate media declaring the pandemic over. Average weekday use of public transport is down 55 percent on pre-pandemic figures. Google mobility data shows visits to retail and recreation venues are down 14 percent and to workplaces 16 percent across the state. The shift is even more stark in the Sydney CBD, where retail and recreation traffic is down 32 percent and 40 percent fewer people are attending workplaces than before the pandemic.

After a popular backlash against the NSW government's provocative cancellation of all Sydney train services on February 21, reports emerged that a proposal for free or half-price public transport fares was discussed by both the state parliament and the "National Cabinet."

The purpose of this plan was not to "apologise" to commuters who had been stranded by the extraordinary rail shutdown, or those affected by the long outage on the Inner West Light Rail network, but to promote increased travel around the city in order to "revitalise" urban centres amid the ongoing pandemic.

This was made completely clear in Elliott's announcement Sunday that travel on Sydney's public transport network would be free for 12 days beginning April 14. The choice of dates is significant. The fare-free period is during school holidays and includes both the Easter and Anzac Day long weekends, meaning the aim is not to provide cost savings to regular commuters but to draw workers, young people and families into the city to stimulate retail and entertainment spending.

Elliott said: "We need to stimulate economic activity and Business Sydney were advocating in favour of these fare free days as a means to get people into the city, into Parramatta."

The RTBU is completely on board with this plan. On March 14, the union's NSW secretary Alex Claassens declared: "We're now calling on the government to give everybody a fare-free day every Friday until June. And if they don't do that, we're going to take industrial action that will force them to."

In other words, Claassens was announcing that the industrial campaign by rail workers, already severely limited by the union, would be turned away from a struggle against the deepening assault on their jobs, pay and conditions, and into a public relations exercise to help repair the government's reputation.

In response, Elliott made a show of opposing the union, accusing workers of "industrial bastardry" for the second

time in three weeks. In fact, he demonstrated that the RTBU was doing the government's bidding by declaring the government would offer free travel every Friday for a year if the union promised to suppress all industrial action.

For the second time in a month, the RTBU has sold out rail workers in order to rescue the NSW government, which confronts mounting anger and frustration among workers throughout the public sector and the broader working class. This is particularly evident among those sections of workers on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Tens of thousands of nurses across the state plan to strike on Thursday, for the second time in six weeks, again in defiance of a ban by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

Late last year, NSW teachers held their first 24-hour strike in a decade, also against the orders of the IRC. Despite a no-strike pledge by the NSW Teachers' Federation, teachers have recently carried out isolated walk-outs and protests opposing mass COVID-19 infection in schools and longstanding understaffing.

In every instance, the unions are seeking to keep a lid on the emerging class struggles, for fear that they will break out of the control of the bureaucracy. The RTBU and the other unions, moreover, are seeking to ensure that there is minimal industrial action during the forthcoming federal election campaign, as they seek to channel anger behind the election of a big-business Labor government.

Rail workers must throw off the shackles of the RTBU and form their own organisations of struggle. Through these independent rank-and-file committees, rail workers should reach out to nurses, teachers and other workers to take up a unified struggle against the growing assault on jobs, pay and conditions.

This requires an industrial and political fight against the capitalist system and all its representatives, including the unions, Labor and the industrial courts, which have enforced decades of attacks on the working class and essential social amenities. Ultimately, what is required is a fight for a socialist perspective and a workers' government, under which critical public services, including transport, health and education can be operated to serve the needs of workers and society as a whole, instead of the profit demands of the wealthy elite.



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