

# Australia: NSW rail workers to hold partial strike in 14-month dispute over pay, safety

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New South Wales (NSW) train drivers will hold a 24-hour partial strike on Friday, as part of a range of industrial action over wages, conditions and safety concerns in a long-running dispute over a new enterprise agreement (EA).

This takes place amid a growing wave of industrial unrest in Australia and around the world, including strikes this week by 140,000 teachers and nurses across NSW. Rail workers have responded to this upsurge with calls for unified action, but the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has done everything it can to suppress discussion of the broader context surrounding the dispute and to maintain the isolation of workers.

On Friday, rail workers will refuse to operate “fourth generation” rolling stock, reducing the capacity of the network by more than two thirds. The ban will prevent the use of all trains built in the past two decades, including the so-called Waratah, Millennium and Oscar sets. The partial strike is set to be repeated on Friday July 8.

In addition to the partial strike, rail workers are undertaking a range of limited work bans. Beginning last Wednesday, rail infrastructure workers are refusing to turn off power to sections of the network, except in emergencies, or issue power-out permits to contractors. This threatens to delay work on converting the T3-Bankstown line for the fully-automated Southwest Metro.

Cleaners have also begun an indefinite ban on mopping floors and cleaning windows or hazardous waste. Many of the cleaners working on NSW trains are not directly employed but instead work for private contractors. Rail workers are demanding that these workers be paid the same rates as directly-employed cleaners, and be offered permanent positions after three months working on the trains.

A central issue in the 14-month dispute is the refusal of the state government to address workers’ concerns over the safety of the New Intercity Fleet (NIF). The NIF trains were explicitly designed for driver-only operation, allowing guards to be eliminated. While the government insists that guards will be retained, at least initially, they will only be

able to monitor the train doors and station platform via camera monitors, reducing sight lines, especially in poor weather.

The state government is now offering an incentive payment of \$6,000 per year to individual workers who agree to work on the NIF, in a clear ploy to divide the workforce and defeat the block that has delayed the deployment of the trains for three years.

Like all public sector workers in NSW, rail workers face a cap on annual wage increases. Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet recently announced a temporary increase in the cap from 2.5 percent to 3 percent (inclusive of superannuation), well below the official inflation rate of 5.1 percent, which itself vastly understates the rapidly rising cost of living.

Under the proposed deal, rail workers would receive a one-off payment of \$3,185, which falls far short of making up for either the 12-month wage freeze since the last EA expired or the real wage cuts contained in the new agreement.

The RTBU has not recently put a figure to its pay demand, only stating that it must be “fair and just.” As an example of what the union considers “fair and just,” the RTBU announced Thursday it had reached in-principle agreement over a deal that will deliver bus drivers in Newcastle a paltry 7 percent pay “increase” over two years. The agreement will also do nothing to address the declining conditions the drivers have faced since Newcastle buses were privatised in 2017 with the full support of the RTBU.

Across NSW, some 140,000 public sector health workers and teachers will strike this week, over the wage cap, longstanding staff shortages and overwork made worse by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As is the case with rail workers, the unions covering these workers have dragged out the disputes over months, holding sporadic one-day strikes designed to allow workers to let off steam. Despite calls from workers for unified action, the health and education unions have ensured the workers are kept isolated, excluding vast sections of workers in each sector.

Over the past week, 50,000 British rail workers have held

three one-day national rail strikes. Like rail workers in NSW, they have been subjected to vicious denunciations by the government, which has labelled them “Putin’s stooges.” Like the RTBU, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union is preparing to ram through a deal that will slash conditions and deliver a pay “rise” far below the rate of inflation.

The RTBU has made only a single mention of the UK strikes, a token message of solidarity posted to Facebook on Friday. The union has been even more taciturn on developments within NSW, making no mention of the nurse and teacher strikes and only two Facebook posts about a June 8 strike by public sector workers. The response of workers to those demonstrates why the RTBU is so determined to keep quiet.

One worker wrote: “Why are the RTBU members not striking in unison with the PSA [Public Service Association]? We all work for the same idiots...” Another posted: “At least someone goes out. How long has it been since the Transport Minister said he’d get our agreement going?” A third asked: “Why is Unions NSW stopping workers from taking action?”

In the face of these demands from workers, the RTBU has begrudgingly called the latest round of industrial action after granting the government an almost three-month “reprieve” as a show of “good faith.” The timing of the most substantial component of the action, Friday’s partial strike, is a deliberate ploy to prevent unified action with either the nurses’ strike on Tuesday, or the teachers’ stoppage on Thursday.

Since March 28, the RTBU has enforced a total ban on industrial action, continually assuring workers that negotiations are proceeding well, even as it admitted there was “nothing to report” from the backroom talks. This suppression has proceeded in the face of increasingly brazen attacks by the NSW government on rail workers and the entire working class.

Indeed, the only significant disruption on the railways this year was when the NSW Liberal-National government itself shut down the entire Sydney network on February 21.

The February shutdown cannot be explained as a response to the limited industrial action planned by rail workers at the time. It was instead a provocative attack on entire working class and the right of all workers to take any form of industrial action, directly motivated by the February 15 strike by nurses, in defiance of a ruling by the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

This was one of a string of attacks and denunciations levied at striking workers by the Perrottet government, including last week’s announcement of a plan to quintuple penalties for unions proceeding with industrial action banned by the IRC to \$55,000 or \$110,000 for repeat offenders. The

intention of this is to provide unions with an excuse to call off strikes on the grounds that going ahead would be financially devastating.

The aggressive actions of the Perrottet government are only one expression of an austerity agenda common to the whole political establishment, state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

Public sector workers in every state face punitive caps on wage increases. In Victoria, the Labor government lowered the pay increase cap from 2 percent to 1.5 percent on January 1, amid rapidly rising inflation.

The newly elected federal Labor government led by Anthony Albanese has swiftly exchanged its pre-election promise of “a better future” for the demand that workers must make “sacrifices.” Albanese has made clear that his government is utterly hostile to across-the-board pay rises and is committed to “budget repair,” that is, deep cuts to social spending.

NSW rail workers are in a political fight, not just against the Liberal-National state government, but the entire political establishment. This battle can be won, but not within the straitjacket of the RTBU, which will continue its campaign of isolation, suppression and delay until workers are ground down into accepting a sell-out seal cooked up by the union bureaucrats in backroom talks with management.

This underscores the need for rail workers to take matters into their own hands, through a break with the union and the formation of new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, in every workplace. Through these committees, rail workers must then reach out to other sections of workers, beginning with the nurses and teachers striking across NSW this week.

This would lay the basis for a unified mobilisation of the 400,000 public sector workers in NSW and serve as the starting point of a turn to workers, throughout the transport industry and more broadly, across the country and around the world, who all confront similar attacks on wages and conditions amid huge increases in the cost of living and cuts to social spending.

This must be directed at 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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