Australia: NSW rail workers continue industrial action despite union-government backroom talks

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New South Wales (NSW) rail workers will proceed with industrial action over wages, conditions and safety this week, in a long-running dispute over a new enterprise agreement (EA).

The planned action includes a repeat of Friday's 24-hour ban on operating "fourth generation" trains, which reduced the capacity of Sydney's passenger railways by around 70 percent.

The NSW Liberal-National government announced this morning that it will apply to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to ban the industrial action by rail workers. This follows last week's threat by Transport Minister David Elliott to ask the pro-business industrial court, established by Labor with the backing of the unions, to tear up the existing EA, which would slash workers' wages and conditions.

Despite these escalating attacks, the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has engaged in continuous backroom talks with the government, aimed at shutting down the industrial action.

On Wednesday morning, workers overwhelmingly rejected an offer to pay drivers and guards $18,000 over three years if they agreed to operate the New Intercity Fleet (NIF).

Later that day, Elliott gave RTBU Secretary Alex Claassens a verbal pledge to implement safety modifications to the NIF demanded by the workers, but refused to provide a written commitment to the $264 million upgrade, despite a promise from the union to wind down industrial action. The government has also stated that it will not commit to safety modifications that would void the "design warranty" of the trains.

The first of the NIF trains, which will be used on the Newcastle, Blue Mountains and South Coast lines, were delivered in December 2019, but have not entered service because workers have refused to crew them over safety concerns.

The Korean-built trains were explicitly designed for one-man operation, eliminating the guard role and giving drivers the additional responsibility of monitoring a large bank of closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitors when approaching and departing stations.

The elimination of guards on the intercity services would destroy around 450 jobs. As an initial step towards removing train guards, the NSW government had planned to transition their role to "passenger service guard" with more general responsibilities on board the train. The Fair Work Commission ruled last year that a clause in the existing enterprise agreement gave workers the power to veto this change.

Previous government promises to modify the NIF trains were dependent on this clause being changed in the new agreement, stripping the rights of workers to oppose future restructuring and elimination of jobs. It is probable that this is why Elliott is refusing to commit to the upgrade in writing until EA negotiations are complete.

The workers are demanding that the CCTV is moved out of the driver's line of sight to eliminate distractions. They also want the trains' systems modified to allow guards to open their crew cabin doors while the train is approaching and departing stations, in order to see and hear what is happening on the platform.

The workers argue that cameras alone are not sufficient, especially in the Blue Mountains, where frequent fog limits visibility on the monitors. They are also concerned that the monitors do not show people shorter than 1.1 metres (3'7"), presenting a serious risk to children.

In a 2GB radio interview on Friday, Claassens made clear that the RTBU did not object to guard-less, or even fully automated trains, as long as the rail system was "purpose-built." Claassens said: "You can do that, you can actually have a driver-only train, absolutely, or a driverless train like the Metro that you can catch today from Rouse Hill to the city."

The Sydney Metro train network is not only fully-automated, but privately operated and is currently being

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expanded to replace sections of the existing rail network in the city's southwest. This is the mechanism the NSW government, with the full backing of the RTBU, is using to further slash jobs for drivers, guards and other rail workers in the coming years.

All other modes of transport in the state, including ferries, buses and light rail, are already in the hands of private operators, after more than a decade of sell-offs, spearheaded by Labor and carried out with the full collaboration of the RTBU and other transport unions.

In addition to the safety issues over the NIF, rail workers confront a real wage cut. Like all public sector workers in NSW, rail workers are subject to a 3 percent cap on annual wage increases, 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.

This is almost identical to a $3,000 "appreciation payment" the NSW government announced for health workers last month in a bid to end industrial action by nurses, and to silence calls from workers for a unified struggle across the public sector.

The main force standing in the way of such a mobilisation is the unions, which are all working closely with the government, despite its aggressive attacks an warkers.

In a sharp expression of this, Claassens repeatedly lauded Elliott during the 2GB interview, describing him as "the one true fighter for us in government." Just over four months ago, Elliott had accused rail workers of "terrorist-like activity" over a shutdown of the Sydney rail network that was, in fact, orchestrated by the state government.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* today, Premier Dominic Perrottet denounced rail workers for their "absurd decision to cripple the trains" and "ludicrous ban" on operating the NIF.

Perrottet insisted last week's strikes by nurses, teachers and rail workers were not about pay or conditions at all, but politically motivated. The unions are indeed trying to divert the anger of workers into a campaign to elect a NSW Labor government next March, but this is not what is motivating the workers themselves.

Instead, workers in NSW, as is the case throughout Australia and around the world, are entering into struggle because the rapidly rising cost of living and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are making living conditions impossible.

The fact is, the Labor Party, at state and federal level, has made clear that it will carry out the same offensive against workers as the Liberal-National Coalition.

On Friday, NSW Labor leader Chris Minns called for "a pause on industrial action" in the NSW public sector. Minns has repeatedly stated that any wage increases under a Labor government would be tied to increased productivity.

The Perrottet government's increasingly frantic response to the growing wave of industrial action, especially among public sector workers, reflects genuine fear within the ruling elite of a mass mobilisation of the working class against the bipartisan assault on wages and conditions.

This is precisely what workers must fight to develop. But this is impossible within the shackles of the RTBU and other unions, which are desperately seeking to isolate disputes, despite the common issues workers confront. They are working hand-in-glove with the government to find a means to shut down the emerging movement.

Rail workers must take matters into their own hands, break with the trade unions and form new organisations of struggle, independent rank-and-file committees. Through these committees, rail workers can reach out to other sections of the working class, starting with nurses, teachers and others in the 400,000-strong NSW public sector.

This would form a powerful basis for a broader mobilisation of the working class in the fight for genuine pay increases, well above inflation, secure jobs and decent working conditions for all. This requires a political struggle against the Liberal-National government, as well as Labor, the unions and the Fair Work Commission.

Ultimately, what is required is a fight for workers' governments and the transformation of society along socialist lines. It is only in this way that decades of cost-cutting and privatisation can be reversed and high-quality public transport, health, education and other vital public services can be operated to serve the social needs of the masses, not the profit interests of the wealthy few.

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