

Australian rail union winds back industrial action in response to government attack

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The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) this week wound back already limited industrial action by New South Wales (NSW) rail workers, despite a Fair Work Commission (FWC) ruling blocking the state government's application to terminate the action.

The RTBU's "good faith" gestures were made under conditions where the NSW government has launched a series of increasingly hostile attacks against the working class, with rail workers and others in the public sector as primary targets.

The union made its first concession of the week on Monday afternoon, ahead of a hearing in the industrial court scheduled for the following day. As a "sign of good faith," the RTBU pledged that workers would operate Millennium and Waratah "B" trains in addition to older trains, meaning around 70 percent of rolling stock would be available to run.

Workers had planned a repeat of the partial strike on Friday, July 1, in which they refused to crew "fourth generation" trains, that is, all those built in the past two decades, eliminating more than two thirds of the fleet.

Having argued in the FWC hearings that the industrial action would cost NSW \$20 million in "lost productivity," the government nevertheless left many of these trains idle despite the RTBU's concession, causing significant delays and overcrowding for commuters.

This is part of a continued campaign by NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and the Liberal-National government to demonise rail workers through provocations and lies. The sharpest expression of this came on February 21, when the government shut down the entire rail network, falsely claiming that workers were on strike.

The RTBU described the FWC's decision to throw out the government's application to terminate this week's industrial action as a "significant win." Despite this, the union proceeded with the reduced actions, as well as dropping a ban planned for Thursday on transpositions—late changes to train schedules or stopping patterns—under the pretext that this was to "ensure access to transport for those who may need it during the extreme weather."

Following the FWC's initial ruling, the RTBU and other rail unions agreed to pause indefinite bans on high voltage switching that were preventing work to convert the T3 Bankstown line to a fully-automated and privatised Metro service.

The FWC hearings continued on Thursday and Friday, with the government seeking a total ban on the rail workers' industrial action. Throughout the week, the RTBU has proudly reported on its role in the anti-democratic court proceedings, declaring last night, "we've done our best and the decision is out of our hands for now."

This is an open declaration that the RTBU, like all other unions, agrees completely with Australia's draconian industrial relations laws, implemented by successive Labor governments, in which workers' wages, conditions, and their right to strike, are subject to the decisions of the pro-business industrial courts.

This week's concessions are only the latest union retreats in an enterprise agreement (EA) negotiation that the RTBU has dragged out for more than 15 months. In that period, the union has held just two strikes, one of four hours and one of eight hours, overnight. Despite the demands of workers, industrial action has been mostly confined to limited bans and token stunts.

Central to the dispute is the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), which began being delivered in late 2019 but has not entered service because rail workers have refused to crew the trains over safety concerns.

The new trains are designed for driver-only operation, which threatens to eliminate the jobs of around 450 guards, while drastically increasing the workload of drivers, who would have to bear the additional burden of monitoring a large bank of closed-circuit television (CCTV) screens when approaching and departing stations.

While the government insists there are no immediate plans to sack guards, last week's verbal promise to modify the trains to address the safety issues was conditional on workers accepting the proposed EA. It includes a modified clause that would limit their ability to oppose changes to

position descriptions, paving the way for driver-only operation in the near future.

The proposed three-year EA would see workers receive annual pay “rises” of just 3 percent, 3.5 percent (dependent on “productivity”) and 2.5 percent, inclusive of 0.5 percent superannuation increases, in accordance with the pay cap covering all NSW public sector workers.

The RTBU has not advanced a revised wage demand above its initial claim for a 3.5 percent annual increase, far below the latest official inflation rate of 5.1 percent for the March quarter, which is itself a vast understatement of the rapidly rising cost of living.

This substantial cut to real wages follows a 14-month wage freeze since the last EA expired, which has cost workers far more than the one-off payment of \$3,185 they are set to receive upon signing the new deal.

The RTBU’s silence on wages is a strong signal that the union is preparing a sell out, in which the government’s limited and highly conditional promises on the NIF will be hailed as a victory for workers, who will be told a small reduction in the massive wage cut is “the best you can hope for.”

This mirrors the recent actions of the NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association (NSWNMA) and the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), which cover nurses and teachers who have carried out multiple strikes in opposition to the pay cap and intolerable working conditions.

At a stop-work meeting last week, NSWNMA secretary Brett Holmes opposed a motion from the floor for the union to advance a 7 percent per annum pay claim, threatening, “three percent is terrible, but zero is worse.”

Two days later, speaking at a rally of teachers carrying out their third 24-hour strike in less than seven months, NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos did not advance a pay claim at all.

Like the RTBU, the NSWTF is completely silent on COVID-19, while the NSWNMA makes only limited references to the deadly virus. The reality is that these workers are all on the “frontlines” of the ongoing pandemic, and continue to risk their health and lives every day as infection numbers rise and the few remaining public health measures in place are abandoned by governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

The determination of teachers and nurses to fight is such that the unions have repeatedly been compelled to proceed with the strikes, despite bans issued by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

In response to the growing wave of industrial action, particularly among public sector workers, the Perrottet government announced it would increase fines for such “illegal” strikes more than fivefold, to a maximum penalty

of \$110,000 per day.

Late Wednesday, the Australian Workers’ Union, along with several other unions, called off a strike by around 800 transport construction and maintenance workers, in accordance with a ruling by the IRC. The 24-hour strike, due to take place the following day, was also in opposition to the sub-inflationary pay increase cap.

Despite the common issues confronting these workers, the unions have worked at every stage to isolate the disputes and suppress demands for a broader mobilisation.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges rail workers to take up a unified struggle with teachers, nurses and other public sector workers, for real wage increases, well above inflation, decent working conditions, and for high-quality, safe, public transport, education and health services, accessible to all.

This will require a political fight, not only against the Liberal-National NSW government, but Labor, the unions and the industrial courts.

As the foundation of this struggle, the SEP calls upon workers to form new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, in every depot, hospital and school.

A network of such committees across the 400,000-strong NSW public sector would form a powerful basis for a turn to broader sections of the working class, 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 workers’ government and the reorganisation of society along socialist lines, under which critical public services, including transport, health and education can be run to serve the interests of the entire working class, instead of the profit demands of the wealthy elite.



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