

Australia: NSW rail workers step up industrial action over wages, unsafe trains

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Rail workers in New South Wales (NSW) have begun a renewed campaign of industrial action in an ongoing dispute over wages and conditions as well as safety concerns over the introduction of a new fleet of trains.

Throughout August, the workers will carry out a range of limited work bans and four six-hour stoppages, each of which will be restricted to a different geographic region within the state-owned network.

The first of these stoppages will take place from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Wednesday August 10, involving workers at all stations, depots and maintenance yards on the T4 Eastern Suburbs and Illawarra line. This will be followed by similar stoppages on other lines on August 17, 23 and 25, and a ban on operating “fourth generation” trains—around 70 percent of the fleet—on August 31.

The schedule of actions announced Monday, assuming it proceeds as planned, will be a marked escalation of the dispute, reflecting workers’ growing anger and frustration over the protracted enterprise agreement (EA) negotiations.

However, these isolated stoppages and their timing, between the morning and evening peak travel periods, have been designed by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) to minimise disruption and prevent any mass demonstrations by the entire workforce.

This divisive strategy has been employed by the union bureaucracy throughout the dispute, most recently in a four-hour stoppage beginning at midnight last Thursday. While the RTBU claimed the strike was “an opportunity to come together and show solidarity,” it was in fact an exercise in division, with 12 separate events across the network, including nine in Sydney alone.

Last week’s stoppage was, in the words of RTBU secretary Alex Claassens, timed “not to impact commuters” and to ensure most services were operating in time for the morning peak.

Central to the dispute is the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), a

set of trains ordered in 2015 and explicitly designed for driver-only operation, threatening the jobs of around 450 guards. The design of the trains also substantially increases the workload of drivers, who are required to monitor 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, the proposed EA includes a modified clause that would limit workers’ ability to oppose changes to position descriptions, paving the way for driver-only operation in the near future.

The workers are demanding that the CCTV screens are 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 NSW government has made verbal assurances that the NIF trains will be modified in line with workers’ demands, but these promises, which have been retracted and restated multiple times, are highly conditional. The government is currently insisting that it will only provide a written commitment to carry out the safety modifications *after* the proposed EA is accepted by workers.

Workers resoundingly rejected the government’s June offer of a \$6,000 per annum “bonus” for drivers and guards if they agreed to crew the NIF without modifications. Under conditions of rapid inflation, and having not received a pay rise since April 2020, this is a powerful expression of their commitment to the safety of workers and passengers.

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 advanced a demand for a meagre 3.5 percent annual wage increase, exclusive of super. This is far below the official inflation rate of 6.1 percent for the June quarter, which is itself a vast understatement of the rapidly rising cost of living.

The union has not increased this demand since the beginning of the dispute, despite soaring inflation and repeated interest rate increases by the Reserve Bank of Australia. Their continued silence on wages is a strong signal that the union is preparing to ram through a sell-out deal, hailing a slightly reduced cut to real wages as a “victory.”

Over the almost 18 months of bargaining, the union has restricted industrial action to three four-hour strikes, four one-day bans on operating newer trains, and a handful of sporadic and limited work bans.

In fact, the most significant disruption to the state’s railways during the dispute—a complete shutdown of the network on February 21—was not carried out by workers or the union, but orchestrated by the NSW government. This provocation, intended as a warning, not just to rail workers, but to the entire working class, was accompanied by hysterical denunciations of workers by members of the state and federal governments and the corporate media.

Then as now, the RTBU responded to the government’s hostility with conciliation, scrambling to restore service and resuming backroom negotiations with Transport Minister David Elliott less than 24 hours after he had accused workers of “terrorist-like activity” over the chaos his own government had created.

Early last month, despite a Fair Work Commission (FWC) ruling against a government bid to block planned partial strikes, the RTBU further limited the actions, voluntarily increasing the number of trains workers would crew and calling off other bans. The union then allowed almost three weeks to pass before holding its next action.

The RTBU continues to paint the attack on workers as the product of individual ministers within the NSW Liberal-National government. In the June issue of its *Rail & Road* magazine, the union pinned blame for the government’s refusal to commit to NIF modifications solely on Industrial Relations Minister Damien Tudehope. Promoting illusions that workers can advance their interests by pressuring politicians, the RTBU wrote: “Minister Tudehope is only one Minister, and we need to lean on the others involved to do the right thing by our members and the community.”

The column explained that the union had written to Premier Dominic Perrottet in May urging him to “pull his

ministers into line.” The bankruptcy of this perspective was exposed on July 3, when, with both Tudehope and Elliott on leave, Perrottet himself initiated FWC proceedings against rail workers’ industrial action.

The reality is, workers will gain nothing through appeals to capitalist governments, whether Liberal-National or Labor. NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has made clear that wage increases must be tied to increased “productivity,” in line with the agenda of his recently elected colleagues in the federal Labor government.

To advance their struggle, rail workers must take up a political fight against the Liberal-National government, Labor and the industrial courts. This will require the formation of new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees completely independent of the RTBU or any of the other unions, which all serve as the industrial police force of governments and management.

Through these committees, rail workers can unite with the hundreds of thousands of other public sector workers in NSW, including teachers, nurses and others who have recently entered into the class struggle over unsafe working conditions and deepening cuts to real wages.

This would form a powerful basis for a turn to the broader working class throughout Australia and internationally. Around the world, spiralling inflation and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are making it impossible for workers to live as before, driving a global upsurge of industrial and political unrest.

Above all, what is required is a fight for workers’ governments and the reorganisation of society along socialist lines, under which critical services, including transport, can be operated under democratic workers’ control with decent wages and conditions for staff, along with safety and public amenity, no longer subordinated to the austerity demands of the financial elite.



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