

Australia: NSW rail workers continue industrial action with six-hour strike

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Sydney rail workers are continuing their campaign of industrial action, with a range of limited work bans in place throughout August, as well as five partial strikes.

The first of these strikes, a six-hour stoppage affecting only the T4 Eastern Suburbs and Illawarra Line, was on Wednesday, with the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) holding a stop-work meeting at Hurstville Entertainment Centre, in Sydney's south.

Last week's partial strike, as with all those planned, was "carefully designed to ensure commuter services can still run," according to RTBU secretary Alex Claassens, who expressed "disappointment" on Wednesday that services had been cancelled.

A key issue in the dispute is a demand from workers for the government to modify the New Intercity Fleet (NIF) to address their concerns over passenger safety.

The new trains, which are explicitly designed for driver-only operation, do not allow guards to open the crew cabin doors while approaching and departing stations, limiting their capacity to see and hear what is happening on the platform. Instead, passengers will be observed through large banks of closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitors.

The workers are demanding that these screens be 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 doors.

While the NSW government has verbally agreed to make these changes, with the disclaimer that nothing will be done that would "void the warranty," it has insisted that no written guarantee will be provided until workers accept their proposed enterprise agreement (EA).

The government's 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.

The RTBU is calling for a meagre 3.5 percent annual wage increase, exclusive of super, far below the official inflation rate of 6.1 percent. The union's insistence to workers that the question of wages will be the last item up for

negotiation, once a "deed" on the NIF is secured, is a sure sign that it is preparing to ram through a pay deal that leaves workers well behind the rapidly rising cost of living.

At last week's stop-work meeting, workers told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* that, while the NIF was a major concern, there were other longstanding issues that were not being prominently raised by the union.

One worker said: "Most of us on the train crew side, we're waiting for another Waterfall accident to happen. We've got so many gaps and holes at all levels, from the top down."

She was referring to a 2003 incident, in which seven people were killed and 42 injured after a train driver suffered a heart attack. A subsequent investigation found that the "deadman brake" fitted to the train had been known for more than a decade to be inadequate.

Pointing to the problems with the privatisation of maintenance, she said: "We're having more and more problems with the trains and I don't know if [maintenance contractor] EDI Downer is really being held accountable anymore. In the last couple of years, things have just been sliding.

"But most certainly, the biggest change was when we changed to Sydney Trains and NSW Trains, and then Gladys [Berejiklian] introduced Transport for New South Wales to be an umbrella organisation to make decisions for us, but they're not even from our industry."

The splitting up of the state's railways into corporatised entities is part of decades-long preparations for transferring ownership, or at least operation, of all of the state's public transport to big business.

In NSW, the privatisation of public transport began with the 2004 Unsworth review, ordered by then Labor Premier Bob Carr, whose government also presided over the sell-off of NSW's rail freight services and the destruction of train maintenance workshops and track repair divisions.

Throughout Labor's 16-year reign in NSW from 1995–2011, the RTBU worked hand-in-glove with the government as it slashed funding and allowed the state's public transport system and other infrastructure to run down

in preparation for privatisation.

The RTBU is completely silent on the ongoing threat of privatisation. Rail is the only mode of mass transit in NSW that remains (mostly) in public hands. Operation of the state's bus, ferry and light rail networks have all been contracted out to private operators, meaning that passenger service and the jobs, pay and conditions of workers are subordinated directly to the profit interests of multinational transport corporations.

The RTBU, along with other unions, has actively collaborated in the decimation of the NSW public transport sector. When Newcastle's buses, light rail and ferries were privatised in December 2016, the union "welcomed" the ten-year deal with Keolis Downer. Then RTBU NSW Bus Division secretary Chris Preston declared it was "a great step forward for Newcastle transport workers, who can now finally put a face to their future employer."

The privatisation of Sydney's railways is also well underway. All recent and forthcoming expansion of the network, including the North West Metro, Western Sydney Airport and Sydney Metro West lines, forms part of the Sydney Metro system. The existing T3 Bankstown line, once converted, will also be part of this network, in which fully-automated, driver- and guard-less trains are operated by Metro Trains Sydney, a multinational joint venture between MTR Corporation, John Holland and UGL Rail.

The expansion of Sydney Metro is clearly intended as the mechanism by which the city's entire rail network will be privatised and automated, destroying thousands of jobs.

The RTBU has played a critical role in suppressing workers' opposition to this gradual privatisation. For more than two decades, the union has not allowed workers to carry out a network-wide 24-hour strike, repeatedly calling off industrial action based on phoney claims that negotiators were "close to agreement."

In 2018, despite massive support among workers for industrial action, the union called off a planned 24-hour strike after it was declared illegal by the Fair Work Commission (FWC). Claassens made clear the union would enforce the anti-worker tribunal's decision, stating the union would "always abide by Fair Work Commission rulings."

The RTBU then rammed through a regressive deal for Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workers in the face of substantial opposition. In exchange for a meagre 3 percent per annum wage rise, workers were forced to accept numerous attacks on their conditions.

In 2008, the RTBU called off a planned strike because it would have interrupted a public appearance by the Pope for Catholic World Youth Day. The clash of dates had attracted a torrent of denunciations from politicians, big business and the corporate media.

NSW Labor Premier Morris Iemma branded the strike "industrial terror," while Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared: "All of Australia, including those in this particular union, I believe should treat [the Holy Father] with respect."

After rushing in to a closed-door discussion with the transport minister, the RTBU announced that the strike had been called off, in "a win" for workers and commuters alike.

In fact, while workers had demanded a 5 percent pay rise and a retraction of the Labor government's planned job cuts, the union had accepted the government's offer of just 2.5 percent. Any additional pay increase would be contingent on union-enforced "productivity improvements," in other words, the slashing of jobs and hard-won conditions.

In accepting this regressive deal, the RTBU became the first union to endorse the Labour Expenses Cap, which now covers the entire NSW public sector and has been a primary driving force behind strikes by nurses, teachers and others this year, involving a total of around 170,000 workers.

It is to these layers that NSW rail workers must turn. This will require a conscious break with the RTBU and its legacy of suppression and betrayal, and the formation of new organisations, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions and Labor.

Through these committees, rail workers can reach out to other sections of the working class, starting with the growing number of public sector workers now entering the class struggle.

This would be a powerful start to a broader mobilisation of workers in a fight for genuine pay increases, well above inflation, secure jobs and decent working conditions for all.



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