

Australia: Union suppresses discussion of a socialist perspective as rail workers continue strikes in NSW

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18 August 2022

Rail workers for Sydney Trains and New South Wales (NSW) Trains continued their industrial action with a partial strike yesterday.

At a small stop-work meeting in Sydney, officials from the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) advanced the bankrupt perspective of appealing to the state government. At the same time, they sought to prevent workers reading a statement by the Socialist Equality Party, calling for an expansion of the struggle and a political fight against the onslaught on jobs and conditions.

The dispute centres around safety concerns with the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), with workers refusing to crew the trains until the government carries out modifications to address these issues. The government continues to insist that this will only be done if workers accept the proposed enterprise agreement (EA), which provides annual pay “increases” of just 3 percent, 3.5 percent (dependent on productivity) and 2.5 percent.

At the meeting yesterday, workers also expressed concerns over the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with one driver noting: “Even the police don’t wear masks on trains now.”

She said that large numbers of workers were regularly off sick, with the result being that “most drivers and guards are at the end of their fatigue score.”

Workers on the T2 Inner West and Leppington, T3 Bankstown, T8 Airport and South, and Southern Highlands lines walked off the job between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. yesterday as part of an ongoing dispute over crew and passenger safety, as well as a proposed EA that would slash real wages.

The stoppage was the second of four region-specific partial strikes planned for August, with the remaining two set to occur on Tuesday and Thursday next week. In addition, on August 31, workers will refuse to operate “fourth generation” trains—all those built in the past two decades—reducing the available fleet by around 75 percent.

Workers are also carrying out a range of work bans throughout the month. Except on days when strikes are in place, workers will not issue or accept transposition slips—late changes to train schedules or stopping patterns. Until September 6, rail workers will leave station gates open and

refuse to issue fines, potentially slashing revenue.

Yesterday, train crew began a three-week ban on operating trains that do not meet “maintenance centre minimum standards.” Until September 1, drivers will lower the pantographs when stabling trains, disconnecting them from overhead electric power, which increases the time taken to prepare the trains for service in the morning. The RTBU told workers last Friday that “plans are also in motion” for further action next month, but nothing specific has been announced.

The August calendar of industrial action is the most substantial taken during the almost 18-month dispute. This reflects the mounting anger and frustration of workers, both toward the state Liberal-National government and the RTBU, which has repeatedly called off planned actions despite favourable rulings from the industrial courts.

While the number of actions this month represents a significant escalation of the dispute, the RTBU is still doing everything it can to isolate workers and limit their opposition to management and the government. By restricting stoppages to different geographic areas, the union is preventing any mass gathering, in which workers could have open discussions among the rank and file, or compel the bureaucracy to answer unwelcome questions in front of the entire membership.

As a result, only a few dozen workers attended the stop-work meeting in Lidcombe yesterday, with several indicating that they had only found out about the meeting the previous day.

Even among this small group, the RTBU was determined to prevent workers from speaking to Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members or reading the material they were distributing. The bureaucracy is intensely hostile to the SEP’s call for rail workers to turn to the broader working class and develop a unified offensive against not just the Liberal-National government, but the entire capitalist establishment, including Labor and the unions themselves.

The RTBU is also extremely sensitive to the SEP’s exposure of the union’s decades-long record of betrayals and its enforcement of cuts to jobs, wages and conditions by successive governments.

The union’s attacks on the democratic right of its members to

hear a socialist alternative is an indication of the bureaucracy's determination to suppress any independent discussion or action among workers. This reflects the RTBU's growing concern, shared by the entire ruling class, of a mounting rebellion of workers that the unions will not be able to contain.

In an attempt to divert the anger of workers away from any challenge to the political establishment, the RTBU is continuing to promote illusions that the longstanding dispute can be resolved in workers' favour through appeals to elements within the state government.

Senior ministers in the crisis-ridden NSW Liberal-National government have over recent days engaged in a war of words over who is responsible for the continued industrial action. Transport Minister David Elliott has harshly criticised Treasurer Matt Kean and Employment Relations Minister Damian Tudehope for souring the government's relationship with the RTBU through their refusal in May to modify the NIF despite Elliott's verbal commitment to do so.

Elliott told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "It's very hard for me to look [the unions] in the eye and expect them to believe me after I had the rug pulled out from under my feet last time, but that's what you get when you send a boy in to do a man's job."

RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens agreed, saying: "There's an inherent distrust between the RTBU and various NSW ministers because they keep backflipping on us." Claassens has repeatedly promoted Elliott, declaring early last month he was "the one true fighter for us in government."

Elliott's vitriolic attack on Kean is motivated by the fact that he believes he had been close to negotiating a behind-closed-doors deal with Claassens that the union could have sold as "the best you're going to get," forcing workers to accept a cut to real wages in exchange for a highly conditional government pledge to upgrade the NIF.

Whatever differences exist within the Liberal-Nationals, the union's promotion of any parliamentarian as a "friend" of workers is a complete lie. Elliott issued some of the most vicious attacks on workers, accusing them of "terrorist-like activity" when the government shut down the rail network in February.

The fact is, the introduction of the NIF, the ultimate purpose of which is to do away with guards entirely, is merely the latest stage in a decades-long restructuring of NSW public transport aimed at privatisation, kicked off by Labor with the 2004 Unsworth review.

The RTBU has aided and enforced this at every stage, enabling the full privatisation of buses and ferries, and the construction of new, privately-operated and driverless, light rail and "Metro" lines.

Labor opposition leader Chris Minns has repeatedly called for an end to the dispute, and insists that any wage increases in the public sector should be linked to increased "productivity." This is in line with the wage-slashing agenda of Anthony

Albanese's federal Labor government.

Around the world, the rapidly rising cost of living, escalating global conflict and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are driving an upsurge of the class struggle, despite attempts by the unions to shut it down.

Australia is by no means exempt from this process. In virtually every state and territory, public sector workers, with health workers, teachers and others on the "frontlines" of the pandemic in the vanguard, are taking action against punitive wage increase caps, well below the current inflation rate of 6.1 percent.

In NSW alone, some 170,000 public sector workers have carried out strikes this year. In just the last week of June, nurses, public and Catholic school teachers, as well as rail workers, all walked off the job. These three actions were kept entirely separate by the unions, despite calls from workers for a combined fight.

Such a unified struggle requires workers to take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in every workplace. Through a network of these committees, workers can develop a powerful counter-offensive against the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions.

This is a political struggle, not only against the state Liberal-National administration, but Labor, the unions, the industrial courts and the entire political establishment.

The ongoing privatisation offensive poses the need for an alternative political perspective, which rejects the subordination of every aspect of society to the profits interests of the corporate and financial elite.

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 with decent wages and conditions for workers, and for the benefit of society as a whole, not rapacious shareholders and capitalist governments that do their bidding.

This is the perspective that the RTBU is desperately seeking to keep out of the hands and minds of its members, and precisely the path that rail workers must take.



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