

Australia: Where to for the New South Wales rail dispute?

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After months of limited stoppages and halting industrial action on the railways, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) is preparing to strike a deal with the New South Wales (NSW) government and wrap up the dispute, locking workers into another three years of cuts to real wages.

The trajectory is clear. Left in the hands of the RTBU bureaucracy, this struggle will end in betrayal. Rail workers must not allow this farce to play out any further but must urgently take matters into their own hands.

Rank-and-file committees must be formed throughout the rail network to advance a fight for improved working conditions and a genuine increase in wages, well above the rapidly rising rate of inflation.

To win this fight, rail workers must bring to bear the tremendous power of the working class. This means linking up in a unified struggle with the hundreds of thousands of other workers already engaged in industrial disputes and those just beginning to enter the class struggle as the surging cost of living makes life intolerable.

This is impossible within the framework of the RTBU, which has carried out a campaign to isolate and wear down workers, in preparation for a wage-slashing deal negotiated in back-room talks with management.

These discussions have proceeded despite provocations and aggressive attacks on rail workers by the state government.

In response to limited work bans called by the RTBU in February, the Liberal-National government shut down the entire state rail network without warning. Rail workers were accused of “terrorist-like activity” in an attempt to portray the ensuing chaos as the result of industrial action.

The public quickly saw through this, and the government faced a political crisis of its own making. Rail workers could hardly have had their opponent in a more precarious position!

But what was the response of the RTBU? To swoop in and rescue the government, rushing to ensure service was quickly restored in order to defuse the anger of working people over the government’s provocation. The union bureaucrats headed straight back to the negotiation table.

Since workers voted overwhelmingly for strikes in August 2021, the RTBU has called just a handful of partial stoppages and a sporadic series of limited work bans. The four partial strikes so far this month, each restricted to a portion of the network, have been an exercise in division and demoralisation.

With inflation at 6.1 percent, its highest level in more than 30

years, the union has not advanced a concrete wage demand since its call for 3.5 percent per annum last year, insisting that pay could not be discussed until after the issue of the New Intercity Fleet (NIF) was settled.

Why should workers be asked to choose between passenger safety and a pay rise that meets the cost of living?

Workers’ concerns over passenger safety on the NIF are important but the union’s promotion of this single issue, almost to the exclusion of any other, is a sign that workers will be told they have no choice but to make concessions in exchange for the NIF modifications they demand.

Entirely absent from the union discussion on the NIF is the agenda behind the acquisition of trains capable of driver-only operation—the shift towards fully-automated trains as part of broader restructuring aimed at slashing jobs in preparation for a privatisation bid.

Rail is the only mode of mass transit in NSW that has not yet been privatised, and the RTBU has presided over the whole sell-off.

This is just one aspect of the betrayals perpetrated by the RTBU against its membership. In one dispute after another, the union has called off strikes and traded off hard-won conditions for minimal wage increases.

In 2008, the RTBU was the first union in NSW to agree to the 2.5 percent pay increase cap that now covers every public sector worker in the state. In 2014, the union allowed the deletion of redundancy and redeployment clauses, clearing the way for mass sackings. In 2018, the RTBU shut down a planned 24-hour strike in accordance with a Fair Work Commission (FWC) ban.

Workers are now told their industrial action must proceed in piecemeal and limited fashion to avoid being shut down again by the FWC. In fact, during the current dispute, the union has repeatedly called off or reduced planned actions even though the FWC ruled they could go ahead.

The reality is that the unions are not the victims of Australia’s draconian industrial relations laws, but their architects and enforcers. The Fair Work Act, which outlaws most industrial action, was drawn up by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government in collaboration with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

The unions rely on these laws to justify their suppression of workers’ demands for strikes and their endless compromising with management and government, in the name of “good faith

bargaining.”

These laws, and the industrial courts themselves, are not an all-powerful force. Their authority can and must be challenged by the working class. This will require a fight against the unions, which defend the courts and use their rulings as cover to shut down industrial action and ram through regressive deals, and against the Labor Party.

The RTBU promotes illusions that the election of a Labor government will resolve the issues confronting rail workers. The reality is that Labor is spearheading a deepening assault on working-class pay and conditions throughout the country, in line with the demands of the financial elite.

The recently elected federal Labor government led by Anthony Albanese is demanding that workers make “sacrifices” and take “tough medicine.” It insists that any wage increases must be tied to “productivity,” i.e., increased exploitation.

At the state level, NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has repeatedly denounced the rail strikes, declaring on 2GB radio this week: “I’ve made it clear that we don’t support these strikes... further strikes are just going to antagonise the transport public.”

The RTBU has frequently warned of the need to “keep the public on side,” in order to justify its limited industrial action. The corporate media, along with the major political parties, have relentlessly promoted the conception that there is a rising tide of opposition to rail workers among commuting workers. The RTBU is using this to drive a wedge between rail workers and other working people, among whom there is, in fact, broad support for the strikes.

The corporatised trade unions have been thoroughly transformed over the past four decades and are no longer workers’ organisations in any sense of the term. Their role is to enforce the demands of employers and governments for the endless slashing of jobs, pay and conditions.

Rail workers must instead build rank-and-file committees to take on the unions, management, the government and Labor, as well as the industrial courts and the pro-business laws they enforce.

These committees should democratically develop and fight for a concrete set of demands based on the needs of workers, not what management and the government say is “possible” or “affordable.”

As a starting point, the Socialist Equality Party proposes the following:

- Immediately increase all pay by 20 percent to compensate for past erosion. Index wages to the current cost of living and introduce an automatic monthly cost of living adjustment to keep pace with rising expenses.
- All decisions on the safety of trains or other new technology must be made by workers, not management.
- Reinstate health measures to protect workers and passengers in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, including capacity limits and enhanced cleaning. Mask requirements must be enforced!
- No to privatisation!
- No to job cuts; end casualisation and contract labour!

These demands cannot be achieved by rail workers alone. What is required is a broad mobilisation of workers, outside of, and in direct opposition to, the stranglehold of the unions.

A vital task of rail worker rank-and-file committees will be to reach out to broader sections of the working class. In the transport sector, this includes thousands of bus drivers in Victoria, NSW and Queensland, who have seen a continual erosion of their conditions under privatisation and who now face massive cuts to real wages.

Rail workers should also appeal to the more than 150,000 other NSW public sector workers, including teachers and health workers, who have been involved in industrial action this year over the state’s punitive wage cap.

Together, these workers must take up a fight that is more than just an industrial dispute. What really confronts workers is a political struggle against all governments, state, territory and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike, which serve to enforce the dictates and demands of big business and the financial elite.

The situation confronting workers in Australia is part of a global assault on the working class. Soaring inflation, the US-NATO proxy war against Ukraine and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are making life intolerable for billions of people around the world. Capitalism is in its deepest crisis since the 1930s and has nothing to offer except deepening cuts to jobs, wages and social spending.

This program is provoking a global wave of working-class struggle. Rail workers in NSW should link up with this international upsurge, including with the tens of thousands of UK rail workers who have carried out a series of national strikes in a determined fight against attacks on their pay, jobs and conditions, despite the efforts of the union bureaucracy to shut it down.

Above all, what is posed is the need for an alternative socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of the health, lives and livelihoods of ordinary people to the profit interests of the wealthy few.

The only way to oppose ongoing pro-business restructuring and the relentless drive for privatisation of the railways is to place them, along with other vital public assets including the schools and hospitals, under democratic workers’ ownership and control.

The SEP stands ready to offer all assistance to rail workers in the formation and development of rank-and-file committees and urges all those who see the urgent need to break out of the current impasse to contact us immediately.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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