

Australia: NSW premier denounces striking rail and bus workers

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In a dramatic escalation of the New South Wales (NSW) government's assault on rail workers, Premier Dominic Perrottet yesterday declared he would seek to terminate their enterprise agreement (EA) if they carried out any further industrial action.

The premier vowed safety modifications to the New Intercity Fleet (NIF) would be "off the table" if workers did not vote to accept a new agreement that would mean a cut to real wages and the loss of hard-won conditions.

Perrottet declared: "I will not have our city grind to a halt, our people inconvenienced any more by the actions of a union movement that belongs back in the 1970s."

Provocatively, the premier delivered this press conference from Martin Place Station, as the final piece of track was laid for the fully-automated, privately operated Sydney Metro City and Southwest line.

He was joined by Transport Minister David Elliott, who made the symbolism explicit, saying: "It is ironic that on the day that we lay down the tracks of Sydney's, indeed the nation's, premium railway network, it's driverless. In the dying days of the union movement, [they] want to flex their muscle one last time."

Earlier, on 2GB Radio, Elliott had described the action by rail workers and bus drivers as "a coordinated political attack on the government."

The corporate media, lining up with the right-wing Liberal-National government, filled the airwaves with stories of "commuter pain" in an attempt to whip up an atmosphere of public opposition to the industrial action.

The aggressive statements came as rail workers across NSW engaged in a one-day ban on crewing "fourth generation" trains, reducing the available fleet by around 75 percent. The partial rail strike coincided with two four-hour stoppages by around 1,100 bus drivers in Region 6, in Sydney's inner west.

Like all public buses in NSW, Region 6 buses are operated under contract by a private company. When the region was privatised, a two-tier employment structure was created, in which drivers previously employed by the government

maintained their existing wages and conditions and were covered by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), while new recruits came under a separate EA negotiated by the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

The TWU and RTBU are calling for "same job, same pay." They are not even pretending to be seeking improvements for workers on the upper tier. Instead, they claim to be trying to raise the conditions of lower-tier workers to the level of the upper tier. The effect of this is to drive a wedge between workers and cover over the attacks being imposed on all drivers.

At no point has either union challenged the root of these attacks—the continuing demands of the private operators who have been handed control of public buses to slash workers' conditions in order to increase their profits. The unions have instead facilitated and enforced each stage of privatisation.

The unions have called just a handful of stoppages, spread out over months, all based on the bankrupt perspective expressed yesterday by TWU NSW secretary Richard Olsen, who issued a plaintive appeal to the government to "fix this up."

The bus drivers' strike was carried out almost in secret. Neither the TWU nor the RTBU advertised the industrial action on their social media. Above all, every precaution was taken to prevent any unified action by rail and bus workers, including those covered by the same union.

RTBU state secretary Alex Claassens said yesterday "I didn't actually know that the bus guys were going out on strike today." Olsen concurred, saying, "it was not contemplated that we were going in concert in any way with the RTBU on the trains."

Yesterday's industrial action by rail workers marked the end of a month of limited work bans and partial stoppages called by the RTBU, each restricted to a small subset of the state's rail network.

A key issue in the dispute is a demand from workers for the government to modify the NIF to address their concerns over passenger safety. The new trains 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 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.

The purpose of the NIF is clear. The trains, explicitly designed for driver-only operation, were ordered to allow the government to cut the jobs of around 450 guards, as part of a decades-long restructuring process aimed at preparing the rail service for privatisation.

While opposition from workers has forced sackings off the immediate agenda, 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 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.

Having been silent on wages for months, the RTBU has revealed that it is calling for just 0.5 percent on top of the government's offer, far below the official inflation rate of 6.1 percent.

The picture painted by Perrottet, Elliott and the corporate media of militant unions engaging in a determined strike campaign with the Labor Party is a fiction.

The reality is, NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has repeatedly denounced industrial action on the railways and called for it to stop. Even Claassens was forced to admit yesterday that Labor was "on a unity ticket with the Liberal Party."

Claassens, himself a prominent Labor member, insisted the party could be reformed, because the unions were there to "keep them honest."

Minns, however, is not an aberration. Labor is a party of big business and the banks. The punitive NSW public sector pay increase cap was first introduced under Labor in 2008, with the RTBU being the first to sign workers up to it. Across the country, Labor governments in other states enforce even harsher caps on public sector wages.

The federal Labor government headed by Anthony Albanese has declared workers must swallow "tough medicine" and, in close collaboration with unions and big business, is currently convening a Jobs and Skills Summit to discuss how to prosecute its wage-slashing agenda.

The RTBU has dragged workers through a protracted campaign of sporadic, isolated and limited work bans and partial strikes, designed to wear workers down and prepare

them for a sell-out.

In February, the government shut down the entire rail network without warning, and attempted to pin the blame on workers, who Elliott accused of "terrorist-like activity." The RTBU bureaucracy immediately rushed into back-room negotiations, ensuring services were quickly restored, and saving the government from a political crisis, as stranded passengers and the broader working class quickly realised who was to blame for the transport chaos.

The union has repeatedly shut down or imposed further limitations upon planned industrial action. On Monday, the RTBU made yet another concession, calling off a ban on operating trains that did not meet "maintenance centre minimum standards."

Yesterday, as Perrottet and Elliott denounced workers, Claassens promised at least "two weeks of peace," as the union has no further significant actions planned.

Rail workers are up against a government that has declared war and is counting the days until the entire network is automated and privatised, a media establishment that is seeking to whip up a hysterical atmosphere, and a Labor "opposition" that is fully committed to this onslaught.

The counter-offensive that these attacks demand cannot be developed within the framework of the RTBU, which is determined to wrap up the dispute with workers worse off than when it began.

In direct opposition to the union's campaign of isolation and suppression, workers must form independent rank-and-file committees, reach out to bus drivers and other workers across the transport sector and more broadly, including the 50,000 nurses striking across NSW today, and mount a unified struggle against the deepening attack on working class jobs, pay and conditions.

What is required is a political struggle against the capitalist system and all its defenders, including Labor and the unions. This is the only way of halting the endless drive for privatisation, restructuring and pay cuts in order to boost the wealth of the financial and corporate elite.

In its place, workers must fight to establish workers' governments to enact socialist policies. This would include placing all mass transit, along with hospitals, schools and other vital services, as well as the major corporations and banks, under full public ownership and democratic workers' control, to serve the needs of working people, not the profit interests of the wealthy few.



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