

Australia: Escalating government threats against rail workers a warning for the working class

Martin Scott

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The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government yesterday stepped up its offensive against rail workers, refusing to attend a bargaining meeting and vowing to haul workers before the Fair Work Commission (FWC) if any industrial action continues beyond 5 p.m. today.

Industrial Relations Minister Damien Tudehope restated the threat, issued by Premier Dominic Perrottet on Wednesday, to demand that the anti-worker tribunal terminate the existing enterprise agreement (EA), slashing working conditions, and ban any further industrial action by workers.

While the current threats are directed at rail workers, the government is seeking to establish a precedent that will be used to shut down strikes by nurses, teachers and other workers. Faced with mounting unrest and long-running disputes involving more than 150,000 workers in the state's public sector, the Perrottet government is determined to prevent any more industrial action.

Tudehope made clear that this includes even the few minimal actions still in place after the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) prematurely ended a ban on operating trains that did not meet government-imposed maintenance standards, on the basis that it was causing too much disruption to railway operations.

Tudehope said if the union did not call off actions as limited as wearing union T-shirts and making PA announcements about the dispute, this would be presented to the FWC as an argument the RTBU was not "bargaining in good faith."

Limited actions such as these are the only ones in play, as the RTBU has not called any more substantial actions in September and says it will not breach the 10-day notification requirement for "protected" industrial action.

Tudehope also reiterated that the government will refuse to carry out modifications to the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), demanded by workers to improve passenger safety, if workers do not immediately vote in favour of a proposed EA that will slash real wages and destroy hard-won conditions.

The union's response has been to question the legal validity of the threats, in effect telling workers that there is nothing to worry about. The RTBU has now launched its own legal case,

asking the pro-business FWC to impose a "good faith bargaining order" on the government.

In this dispute, the RTBU has repeatedly told workers that a 24-hour network-wide strike is impossible because it would be shut down by the FWC. Now, the union is promoting illusions that their fight can be won in this court.

Mark Diamond, national secretary of the RTBU, emphasised the union's turn to this dead-end tactic in a video message to union members from outside the Jobs and Skills Summit in Canberra.

Claiming the Labor government would introduce new legislation to ensure "terminations must be fair," Diamond declared: "Perrottet better watch out, because we've got the federal government on side."

This is a lie. In its attacks on rail workers, the NSW government is carrying out the wage-slashing "productivity" agenda of the federal Labor government, which has warned workers must make "sacrifices" and swallow "tough medicine." The purpose of the Summit was to bring government, business and the unions together to devise a plan to prosecute this assault.

The unions and Labor have consistently promoted the FWC as an "independent umpire" since it was established in 2009. This is utterly false.

The FWC was set up by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government, with the backing of the unions, to enforce Australia's draconian industrial relations laws, which are some of the harshest in the developed world.

Rail workers are under attack, and the union is planning to place their fate in the hands of these industrial courts, which enforce legislation that the union acknowledges is "unfair." This is a perspective that will only end in disaster for workers.

Rail workers cannot mount the necessary counter-offensive against the government's provocations with their hands tied behind their backs by the RTBU.

Workers must take matters into their own hands, make a conscious break with the union and form new organs of struggle, rank-and-file committees. This dispute cannot be allowed to proceed with only one side fighting.

Throughout the long-running dispute, every action of the RTBU has been to empower the Liberal-National government, creating the conditions for this week's assault.

In February, the NSW government shut down the entire rail network without warning and attempted to pin the blame on workers, who it accused of "terrorist-like activity."

Despite the promotion of the government's claims in the media, the working class quickly saw who was really at fault. It was only the swift intervention of the RTBU, rushing into back-room negotiations and ensuring service was restored, that saved the government from a major political crisis.

Since then, Perrottet, Elliot and others in the state cabinet, along with commentators in the corporate media, have not missed an opportunity to demonise striking workers and try to whip up public anger towards the industrial action.

Throughout all of this, the RTBU has carried on its friendly behind-closed-door negotiations and insisted that workers' demands will be achieved through appeals to the increasingly aggressive government.

Numerous planned industrial actions have been called off, either in response to supposed concessions from the government, or to rulings from the FWC. Even when the FWC has dismissed government attempts to shut down actions, the union has called them off anyway, as a sign of "good faith."

When partial strikes have proceeded, the RTBU has ensured they were limited in size and scope, in order to isolate workers and prevent open discussion among the broader workforce.

The union has made clear to the government that, as long as a written promise was provided on the NIF modifications, even a highly conditional one, it was ready to ram through a wage-slashing deal.

The RTBU had not advanced a concrete wage demand until the figure slipped out in a press conference last week, and the reason for the union's silence was immediately apparent—they were seeking just an additional 0.5 percent on top of the government's three-year offer of 3 percent, 3.5 percent and 2.5 percent, well below the official rate of inflation.

The Labor Party has further boosted the Perrottet government's confidence in coming down hard against rail workers. State opposition Leader Chris Minns has repeatedly called for industrial action to end. RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens was forced to admit this week that Labor and the Liberals are on a "unity ticket" against workers. Claassens, however, is himself a prominent member of Labor.

The NSW government is therefore escalating its attack on rail workers with the knowledge that it will be supported openly by Labor, and aided at every step by the union.

But rail workers are not the only section of workers Perrottet has set his sights on. The February 21 shutdown came six days after the first of this year's mass strikes by nurses, and two months after the first 24-hour strike by teachers in a decade.

Perrottet threatened to levy fines against the striking nurses, but was forced to back down when it became clear that a frontal

attack on the state's "pandemic heroes" would potentially spark a response from the working class that his already fragile government would not be able to withstand.

Now, the Perrottet government clearly intends its stepped-up attack on rail workers as the first of many, with nurses and teachers directly in the firing line.

This is an offensive that must be fought, not just by rail workers, but through a unified mobilisation of the broadest layers of workers. But this is impossible within the framework of the unions, which do everything possible to isolate and divide workers.

This means that workers must urgently build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions. Through these committees, workers must link up, across industries and sectors, throughout the state, around the country and globally.

The government's latest attacks demand an immediate response in line with their aggressive character. Through a network of rank-and-file committees across the transport sector, rail workers, in concert with bus drivers and others could mount such a response, including through a statewide strike across all public transport.

It is only through the development of rank-and-file committees that rail workers can appeal to other sections of workers and take up a unified fight against the relentless government and media campaign to demonise them.

But above all, what this week's developments raise is the need for a political struggle. It is not just Labor and the Liberal-Nationals who are on a "unity ticket." It is the unions, the corporate media, the industrial courts and every other organ and defender of the capitalist system, which subordinates the needs of working people to the profit interests of the financial and corporate elite.

Workers must take up a fight for workers' governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing transport under full public ownership and democratic workers control. These vital social resources must be operated to meet the needs of workers and society as a whole, not the profit interests of the banks and big business and the governments that represent them.



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