

Australian union seeks to bury New South Wales rail workers' struggle in industrial courts

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The Fair Work Commission (FWC) will today begin hearing arguments in an application by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) for a “good faith bargaining order” against the New South Wales (NSW) government.

The case was set to start on Tuesday, but was immediately adjourned after the government requested more time to prepare.

The RTBU launched the application in response to Premier Dominic Perrottet’s threat last Wednesday to ask the FWC to tear up the enterprise agreement (EA) covering rail workers if all industrial action on the railways did not cease by 5 p.m. Friday. This would potentially cut workers’ pay by up to 40 percent and destroy hard-won working conditions.

When the Friday afternoon deadline passed, although limited industrial action remained in place, the Liberal-National government did not follow through with its threat. Perrottet was compelled to backpedal on Monday, stating that he had only meant the ultimatum to apply to action “that inconveniences the people of New South Wales,” or that interfered with construction of the new Metro line.

Through its FWC case, the union says it is seeking to “bring the government back to the bargaining table, stop it from following through on its attempt to terminate the agreement, and restrain those ministers out there spreading misinformation and lies from continuing to do so.”

In fact, the union has delivered the government exactly what it asked for. The RTBU has made clear that it will not call any further stoppages until the FWC hands down its ruling, and that it will comply with the requirement to give ten days’ notice in advance of industrial action.

This means the government is guaranteed at least three weeks of industrial peace, during which it can prepare a renewed assault.

Beyond a handful of token ongoing measures, such as wearing union clothing, rail workers have been consigned by the RTBU to the sidelines of their own dispute, which both

the government and the union intend to prosecute through the pro-business industrial courts.

This is a continuation of the role played by the RTBU throughout the 18-month dispute. The union has called only a handful of partial stoppages and has repeatedly called off or wound back already limited work bans.

Above all, the RTBU, along with the other unions involved, has ensured that the rail workers have been kept completely isolated from bus drivers, nurses, teachers and others among the more than 150,000 workers to have carried out strikes in NSW this year.

Amid a relentless government and media campaign to demonise workers and create an atmosphere of public outrage, the RTBU continues to insist that workers can achieve their demands through appeals to Perrottet. In a letter to members on Tuesday, the union wrote: “The only person who can fix this is Dominic Perrottet, but he just doesn’t seem to care.”

The letter complained that the bargaining process has been “shambolic,” and described the government’s adjournment request as “embarrassing.”

The fact is, rail workers are under attack. This is not, as the union suggests, the accidental product of a government that is inept, disorganised or lacking in empathy. It is a highly conscious assault on the wages and conditions of rail workers, intended as the first step in an all-out war on the public sector and the broader working class.

This is the sharpest expression of a process that is not limited to NSW or the Liberal-Nationals. Labor governments around the country enforce sub-inflationary public sector pay increase caps even more punitive than the one in place in NSW.

The federal Labor government has warned workers they will need to make “sacrifices” and swallow “tough medicine,” as it prosecutes a wage-slashing austerity agenda amid the highest inflation in three decades.

Despite this, the union has fostered the illusion that the

federal government will intervene on behalf of rail workers. RTBU National Secretary Mark Diamond declared last Friday: “Perrottet better watch out, because we’ve got the federal government on side.”

Diamond was referring to Workplace Relations Minister Tony Burke’s announcement that the federal government would “seek to legislate to ensure the process for enterprise agreement termination is fit for purpose and fair.” Whatever the outcome of this vague promise, it will do nothing to protect workers from deepening attacks on their wages and conditions.

The FWC and the draconian industrial relations laws it enforces were established by the union-backed Rudd-Gillard Labor government in 2009 as a means of shutting down strikes and imposing massive cuts to wages and conditions.

Now, Labor, again with the full support of the unions, is planning to grant the FWC additional powers to “proactively” intervene into wage negotiations.

NSW Industrial Relations Minister Damien Tudehope criticised Burke for writing a letter on Friday to inform the FWC of the impending changes. Tudehope claimed this “brazen intervention” was a deliberate move by the federal Labor government to interfere in the rail dispute.

This is part of an attempt by both the NSW government and the RTBU to tie the rail dispute to the upcoming state election next March. The government is seeking to burnish its credentials before the ruling elite, as supposedly more willing and able to take on public sector workers. The union is peddling the fraud that a Labor government would end the attacks on rail staff and other workers.

In an August 31 letter to members, the RTBU declared “this government does not deserve a moment of peace between now and the next election.”

Notwithstanding the fact that the same letter repeated the union’s vow to give the government “two weeks of relative peace,” Treasurer Matt Kean this week claimed the statement was evidence that the strikes were part of a conspiracy by the RTBU and Labor to unseat the Liberal-National government.

In truth, no one has done more this year to protect the Perrottet government from the only opposition it truly fears—the working class—than Labor and the unions.

The RTBU has played a critical role. In February, the government faced a potential crisis after it shut down the entire rail network without warning and tried to pin the blame on workers. The unions quickly swept in to ensure service was restored before Perrottet faced retaliation from rail workers or the broader working class, angered by the provocation.

Labor opposition leader Chris Minns has repeatedly denounced the rail strikes. Last Friday he attacked Perrottet

from the right, declaring his “big fear” was that the Premier’s threats would result in more “turmoil and tumult on public transport.”

RTBU State Secretary Alex Claassens, himself a prominent Labor member, was forced to admit last week that Labor was on a “unity ticket” with the Liberal-Nationals. Nonetheless, Claassens insisted the party could be reformed, because the unions were there to “keep them honest.”

All of this political manoeuvring serves as a smokescreen to conceal the reality that the federal Labor government, with the full support of the unions, is preparing a frontal assault on the working class, in line with the demands of big business for increased productivity and profits.

The unions’ promotion of the lie that workers’ issues can be resolved through the election of a Labor government is not simply a question of cronyism. The real purpose of these illusions is to defend the whole parliamentary setup and suppress the development of an independent political struggle by the working class.

This is the fight that rail workers must take up, against not only the Liberal-National government, but Labor, the unions and all other defenders of the capitalist system, which subordinates the needs of working people to the profit demands of the corporate elite.

To carry this out, rail workers must make a conscious break with the RTBU, form rank-and-file committees and reach out to other sections of workers, including bus drivers, nurses, teachers and others already engaged in industrial disputes to mount a unified struggle for real improvements to wages, conditions and safety.

Rail workers do need a political perspective, but not the big business politics of Labor and its defenders. Instead, they should turn to a socialist program, aimed at establishing workers’ governments that would place vital public services, including transport, along with the banks and the major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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