Australia: Rail union announces token industrial action to conceal plans for sellout

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New South Wales (NSW) train station staff will turn off Opal contactless payment machines from next Wednesday, as part of their ongoing industrial dispute with the state government.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced the plan, which it falsely described as a "major action," on Monday, declaring it "good news for commuters." This so-called industrial action is intended to blind rail workers to the union's ongoing attempts to bury the dispute in backroom negotiations and legal proceedings.

Since NSW Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet's August 31 threat to tear up the enterprise agreement (EA) covering rail workers, potentially slashing wages and destroying conditions, every action by the RTBU has been tailored to the state government's demands.

Perrottet declared that any action by rail workers "that inconveniences the people of New South Wales" after 5 p.m. September 2 would cause the government to ask the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to ban all industrial action and terminate the EA.

The RTBU dutifully refused to call any new action until a week later, when it announced that station staff would leave ticket gates open and refuse to do non-critical training and competency assessments. Four days later, the union announced workers would be turning off Opal readers, along with several other token measures.

RTBU director of organising Toby Warnes claimed these actions were designed to "bring the government and management to its knees." The action will do nothing of the sort. Ticket revenue is a tiny fraction of the state's $120 billion budget, covering only one quarter of the cost of running the rail network itself.

The RTBU's first response to Perrottet's threats was to launch its own legal case, appealing to the industrial court to issue a "good faith bargaining order," to "bring the government back to the bargaining table."

The RTBU told the FWC, "there is limited prospect that the dispute will be resolved in the short term without very significant industrial disputation." This is a clear appeal for the anti-worker tribunal to shut down the dispute and impose arbitration, which will resolve nothing for workers.

After two days of hearings, the case has now been adjourned until October 6. RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens indicated yesterday that the union does not intend to call more substantial industrial action while the legal process is underway, saying "we're honouring the process because we've always said we will."

As a result, rail workers have been relegated to the bench, stripped of the right to play an active role in their own struggle.

This is unacceptable. Rail workers cannot sit idly by, while a rotten deal is cooked up behind closed doors by the union, government and the industrial court.

Instead, workers must take matters into their own hands. New organisations of struggle must be formed by workers, outside of, and independent from, the RTBU or any other trade union. These rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, will provide the only means to prepare a counter-offensive against the onslaught on safety, jobs and wages.

Rail workers are not in this fight alone. While the Perrottet government's threats and denunciations have been most sharply directed toward rail workers, the same assault on wages and conditions is underway across the public sector.

This includes more than 120,000 health workers and educators who have carried out mass strikes this year in

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opposition to real wage cuts, overwork and chronic understaffing exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The health and education unions, like the RTBU, have sought to minimise these strikes and, above all, prevent any joint action by different sections of workers.

Through a network of rank-and-file committees, rail workers can link up with these nurses and teachers, as the basis of a unified mobilisation of the more than 400,000 public sector workers in NSW, who all confront real wage cuts under the government pay cap.

The alternative to the fight to build rank-and-file committees and an independent mobilisation of the working class is yet another sellout by the RTBU bureaucracy.

Already, the union has signalled its willingness to impose the dictates of big business on the critical issue of wages. Its demand, of an average 3.5 percent per annum pay increase over three years, is in line with the real wage cuts called for by the Reserve Bank of Australia and the federal Labor government, with understated official inflation already running at over 6 percent.

More broadly, through successive EAs, the union has facilitated the destruction of jobs, conditions and real wages, and prevented workers from mounting a struggle against the gradual privatisation of the NSW railway system. This is entirely in line with the role the union has played in enforcing the privatisation of every other mode of "public" transport in the state.

There are elements within the RTBU that claim Alex Claassens alone is to blame for the union's betrayals over the past decade, along with the one in progress. This is designed to promote the illusion that the bureaucracy can be reformed through the upcoming union elections, which begin next month.

In truth, all of the unions, including the RTBU, have been thoroughly transformed over the past four decades into enforcers of the demands of management and government.

In Britain, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union last week called off national strikes by 50,000 rail workers, supposedly out of "respect" for the passing of Queen Elizabeth.

In the US, after 99 percent of rail workers voted to strike, the rail unions have pursued every avenue to suppress the action, including begging President Biden and the Congress to step in and ban the strike. The unions face overwhelming opposition from workers, who have formed the Railroad Workers' Rank-and-File Committee to fight the unions and organise a national strike.

The desperate manoeuvres by the unions are a reflection of growing concerns among the bureaucracy and the ruling class that a rebellion is brewing in the working class, amid an escalating global social crisis.

Workers around the world confront skyrocketing inflation, as a result of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and trillions of dollars in handouts to big business during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the ongoing threat of illness and death from the virus itself. The working class is responding to these unbearable conditions, with mass strikes and protests escalating around the world every day.

It is to these layers that NSW rail workers, along with teachers, nurses and the broader Australian working class, must turn. What is required is not merely an industrial fight for wages, safety and conditions, but a political struggle against the government, Labor, the unions and all other representatives of capitalism.

Above all, what is posed is the need for a socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of the health, lives and livelihoods of ordinary people to the profit interests of the wealthy few. To oppose the relentless drive for privatisation, workers must fight for railways, along with other vital public assets including the schools and hospitals, to be placed under democratic workers' ownership and control.

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