

Australia: Rail union cancels plan to turn off fare collection machines

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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) will force New South Wales (NSW) rail workers to vote again on whether to continue industrial action in their long-running dispute with the state government over wages, conditions and safety concerns with the New Intercity Fleet.

On Sunday, the union called off a plan for workers to turn off Opal fare collection machines across the state from today, which would have allowed passengers to travel for free.

The RTBU told workers it was cancelling the action, along with an existing ban on closing station gates, due to a “dirty trick” played by the NSW Liberal-National government.

Last week, Transport Minister David Elliott threatened that rail workers would be “charged, prosecuted and sacked” if they proceeded with the action, before the government asked the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to ban the action.

While Elliott has publicly insisted the proposed action was “illegal,” the application to block it was on the basis of a technicality. The government claims that this type of action is not covered by a protected action ballot in January, in which workers voted overwhelmingly for “an unlimited number of stoppages of work of 1 to 24 hours in duration” and “bans or limitations on the manner in which work is undertaken.”

The RTBU immediately called off the plan, telling workers that if the FWC found the Opal machine action was not “protected industrial action,” they could be prohibited from taking any further industrial action during the dispute.

The reality is, no-one has done more to prevent workers from taking action in this dispute than the RTBU itself. In the almost 18-month dispute, the union

has called just a handful of partial stoppages, largely restricting the workers’ struggle to limited work bans.

In the face of intense hostility from the government, including the shutting down of the entire rail network in February, the union has repeatedly responded by rushing back into back-room negotiations, always insisting that a deal is “just around the corner.”

With the official inflation rate at 6.1 percent and rising, the RTBU has advanced a meagre demand for pay “increases” averaging just 3.5 percent over three years.

Since Premier Dominic Perrottet threatened late last month to terminate the enterprise agreement covering workers if industrial action that “inconvenienced” passengers continued, the union has dutifully refused to call any such action. Instead, the RTBU is seeking to bury the dispute in the anti-worker industrial courts.

This latest plan to turn off Opal machines is little more than a public relations stunt, that will have minimal impact on the state budget and do nothing to compel the government to accept workers’ demands.

The fact that it has become the subject of yet another FWC case and now a new protected action ballot only increases its status as a complete diversion. Having been sidelined by the union since the beginning of the month, workers now face a further delay of at least three to four weeks before they can take any further action.

The opaque and drawn-out process of applying for and conducting these ballots was consciously devised as a means of suppressing strikes by the union-backed Rudd-Gillard Labor government when it established the Fair Work Act in 2009.

The RTBU’s letter to members on Monday, insisting the fare reader action is merely “postponed,” was clearly written in response to the anger of workers over

the decision to abandon the action.

The RTBU's real motive behind the revote is transparent, however. Having dragged workers through months of sporadic and limited actions designed to isolate and demoralise, the union is now testing the waters to see if workers have been worn down to the point where they will begrudgingly accept a rotten deal. Anything less than an overwhelming vote in favour of the Opal machine plan will be used by the bureaucracy as a pretext to abandon any further industrial action.

The fact is, this ballot is a farce. Rail workers made their intentions clear in January when 96 percent voted for strikes. But the RTBU is actively seeking to block its members from implementing this vote, as it has all year, even though 24-hour strikes would be entirely lawful.

It is clear that, left in the control of the RTBU and other unions, the struggle by rail workers will end in betrayal. This revote is just the latest indication that the union is seeking to cut workers out of the dispute entirely and place their fate in the hands of the lawyers and industrial courts.

To prevent the sell-out being prepared by the union, rail workers must take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, must be built to democratically prepare and develop a plan to fight for a set of demands based on the needs of workers, not what management, the government, or the RTBU says is affordable or possible.

In this fight, rail workers will find powerful allies in the growing sections of the working class entering into struggle in Australia and around the world, increasingly in a direct rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy.

Last week, nurses at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse in inner-west Sydney rejected a wage-slashing enterprise agreement tacitly endorsed by the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association, after workers waged a strong "vote no" campaign.

In the US, more than 500 rail workers attended an online rank-and-file committee meeting hosted by the Socialist Equality Party last week and resolved to reject any attempt by the unions or Congress to ram through a sell-out contract or violate their right to strike.

Around the world, millions of workers are entering the class struggle, fighting against a major assault on

working conditions and real wages, amid massive increases in the cost of living, the ongoing threat of COVID-19 and escalating global conflict.

In Australia, workers are striking at the highest rate in almost two decades. In the NSW public sector alone, more than 150,000 nurses, teachers and other workers have carried out strikes this year. While the sharpest denunciations and provocations by the Liberal-National government this year have been directed toward rail workers, they have been motivated by, and targeted at, this mounting upsurge across the sector.

To defeat the onslaught, rail workers in NSW must link up these workers, along with broader sections of the working class, and take up a unified political struggle against the government, Labor, the industrial courts and the unions.

Above all, what is required is 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.

To oppose ongoing pro-business restructuring and the relentless drive for privatisation of the railways, they, along with other vital public assets including the schools and hospitals, as well as the banks and corporations, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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