Australia: NSW rail union ban on fare collection set to begin

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From tomorrow, rail workers in New South Wales (NSW) will switch off Opal fare collection machines attached to station gates on weekday afternoons as part of a long-running dispute with the state government over wages, conditions and passenger safety. The action potentially allows some passengers to travel for free between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m., Monday to Friday on the state-owned railways.

A similar action was originally planned for early September, but it was abandoned by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) after the NSW government raised questions over the legality of the action. The decision was based on a technicality—a vote by workers in January to approve protected industrial action, including strikes and a raft of work bans, did not cover turning off Opal machines.

The RTBU seized on the government's threats as a pretext to cancel the Opal plan. No other industrial action was called. As a result, workers have been sidelined as more than seven weeks have passed since the end of a series of limited stoppages and work bans in August.

The union organised a new protected action ballot which closed last week with 97 percent of workers who responded endorsing the Opal action. The ballot result shows that workers remain determined to fight, despite the efforts of the RTBU to wear down their resolve.

Workers are demanding a written guarantee that the government will carry out modifications to the New Intercity Fleet to make them safe for passengers. The government has refused to provide such an undertaking unless workers agree to a new enterprise agreement that will slash real wages and erode working conditions. With the offical inflation rate at 6.1 percent and the real increase in the cost of living far higher, the RTBU has advanced a meagre demand for wage "rises" averaging just 3.5 percent.

The Opal machine "action" is a farce. It is specifically intended by the RTBU to demobilise workers and not disrupt the regular operations of the railway network.

RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens made this clear in a press conference yesterday, declaring this was "the kind of protected industrial action we want to take because we know the only other options available to us do tend to result in disruption to commuters."

The so-called action, which amounts to little more than a lone worker at each station pushing a button, has been contrived by the RTBU to deepen the isolation of workers that has characterised the union's handling of the entire dispute.

The union bureaucracy is determined to crush even the limited sense of solidarity afforded by short region-specific stoppages carried out in August. Even the minimal opportunity for open discussion between workers at these tightly-controlled events is no longer available.

The trajectory is clear. The RTBU bureaucracy is doing everything it can to divert and suppress the discontent and anger of rail workers so as to prepare the way for a rotten agreement negotiated behind closed doors with management, or imposed by the anti-worker Fair Work Commission (FWC).

To avoid this sell-out, rail workers need to take matters into their own hands. New organisations of struggle, democratically run by workers and completely independent of the unions, should be built.

These rank-and-file committees are the only mechanism through which workers can assert their immense power as a class. This requires reaching out to broader sections of workers, beginning with the more than 100,000 teachers and nurses across NSW who

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have carried out strikes this year.

Like rail workers, health and education workers have come up against opposition on two fronts—the state government, which is determined to cut real wages and refuses to address chronic staff shortages exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the unions, which have sought to shut down or limit strikes and divert the anger and frustration of workers into support for the pro-business Labor Party.

Rail workers in NSW should also look further afield. Rail workers across the US are determined to fight for real pay increases and improvements to their horrendous working conditions. But they confront a conspiracy between the unions, companies and the Biden administration to prevent them from striking and push through a sell-out deal.

In response, workers have formed the Railroad Workers' Rank-and-File Committee, holding meetings of hundreds of workers across the country to plan and prepare a fight against the unions, management and the government.

The NSW government has responded to the announcement of the latest industrial action with a predictable barrage of denunciations and threats. Transport Minister David Elliott declared yesterday that by allowing passengers to pass through ticket gates without swiping their Opal cards, rail workers were "recklessly putting the lives of our communities in danger."

Elliott said that the government would take the union to the Federal Court, seeking "damages and repayments" over the action, warning this could mean "a lot of financial trouble" for the RTBU. He is only able to make such threats because the RTBU has deliberately blocked any sustained industrial and political campaign.

In February, the government completely shut down the rail network and attempted to blame workers for the ensuing transport chaos. Elliott accused the workers of "terrorist-like activity."

The RTBU responded by rushing back into back-room negotiations and ensuring normal operations were quickly restored, saving the government from a political crisis.

Every attack by the government has been met with a further retreat by the RTBU. Since Perrottet threatened to tear up workers' enterprise agreements, slashing wages and destroying years of hard-won conditions, and refused to negotiate any further if partial strikes continued, the union has called no action besides the Opal machine stunt.

Instead, the RTBU has promoted the lie that workers can achieve their demands through the pro-business industrial courts, or through the election of a Labor government in next year's NSW election.

In fact, Labor leader Chris Minns has repeatedly denounced the rail workers' industrial action and, in line with the wage-slashing agenda of the federal Labor government, has made clear that any wage rises must be tied to "productivity" increases.

The deep distrust and hostility of rail workers to Labor is so pronounced that Claassens was compelled to withdraw his nomination for re-election to the party's administrative committee at the NSW Labor Conference over the weekend. Claassens nevertheless insisted that Labor could be pressured into providing a better deal for rail workers and that his focus was "to get rid of a Perrottet rotten government."

The RTBU's continuous retreats in the face of increasingly hostile attacks has broader consequences for the working class. They have emboldened the Perrottet government to step up their assault on other sections of workers. In recent weeks, tens of thousands of dollars in fines have been imposed on the unions covering nurses and teachers for "illegal" strikes. The government is currently seeking to pass legislation that would increase the maximum penalty more than five-fold.

Rail workers cannot take forward their struggle with the RTBU or any other union in control. The Socialist Equality Party urges rail workers to contact us today to discuss forming rank-and-file committees and taking matters into their own hands. Above all, this struggle needs to be guided by a socialist perspective in opposition to the state government, as well as Labor and the unions, that all insist that the working class must bear the burden of the profound crisis of the profit system.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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