

Australia: NSW rail union calls off fare collection ban as government targets workers in lawsuit

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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) informed workers on Wednesday evening that it had decided to “pause” a plan for workers across the New South Wales (NSW) passenger rail network to switch off Opal fare collection machines on weekday afternoons.

The union claimed it had been “left with no choice” but to cancel the action, after the state government launched a Federal Court case seeking damages for loss of revenue during earlier limited industrial action by rail workers. In August and early September, rail workers kept ticket gates open, potentially allowing passengers to use the trains without paying, although they could still be fined by police.

This was part of a limited campaign of industrial action called by the RTBU in August as part of an 18-month enterprise bargaining dispute over cuts to real wages, job security and passenger safety. Other measures included four six-hour stoppages, each of which involved workers from a different section of the rail network and a one-day block on operating newer trains, along with various bans and work-to-rule actions.

The government claims that turning off the Opal card readers and leaving station gates open does not constitute protected industrial action—for which workers and unions are immune from legal action in most cases—because opening gates and disabling Opal machines are not part of the workers’ regular duties.

The RTBU responded to this anti-democratic act, which it described as “a vicious, unprecedented attack on workers,” by instructing its members to wait quietly while the case against them proceeds. This sends a clear message that the RTBU is prepared to deliver whatever the government demands.

The Opal plan was, from the outset, a cynical diversion engineered by the RTBU bureaucracy. While the union told workers it would “bring the government and management to its knees,” ticket revenue accounts for a tiny fraction of the state’s \$120 billion budget and does not come close to covering the cost of the rail network itself. The real purpose of the stunt was to demobilise workers and channel their determination to fight into a tokenistic “action” that employees would carry out in isolation.

The union first called for workers to shut off the card readers in September as a measure that would comply with Premier Dominic Perrottet’s declaration that there must be no further industrial action that “inconvenienced” passengers.

When the government raised questions over the legality of the plan, the RTBU cancelled the “action” and dragged workers through the drawn-out process of yet another protected action ballot. The purpose of this was to shut workers out of the dispute for weeks while the union continued its backroom discussions with management and legal proceedings in the anti-worker Fair Work Commission (FWC).

The RTBU’s Opal “pause” is only the latest example of the union using an attack by the Liberal-National state government as a pretext to suppress the demands of workers for action.

Despite a clear vote by workers in favour of strikes in January, the RTBU has called just a handful of partial stoppages and limited work bans. Even these meagre actions have been repeatedly called off or cut short by the union bureaucracy in response to threats from the Perrottet government, even after the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC) ruled that they could proceed.

None of this can be explained as the product of innocent mistakes or timidity on the part of the union. Throughout this long-running dispute, as in past betrayals, the RTBU bureaucracy has worked consciously to isolate and wear down rail workers in preparation for a sell-out deal that imposes the demands of the state government.

The bid by the NSW government to seek financial compensation over an industrial dispute is an extraordinary move targeting not just rail workers, but the entire working class. This is not directed at recovering “lost” revenue, but at further restricting the rights of workers to strike, which are already tightly constrained by the Fair Work Act, established by the Rudd Labor government in 2009 with the full support of the unions.

The lawsuit follows a series of attacks launched by Perrottet this year aimed at preventing an eruption of mounting class tensions in the state.

In recent weeks, the state Supreme Court has handed down

finances totalling \$85,000 to the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) and NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), over strikes and work bans undertaken by educators and health workers. Earlier this year, the unions were compelled by the profound anger and frustration of workers to go ahead with the strikes despite orders from the Industrial Relations Commission to cease the action.

On Thursday, a bid by the Perrottet government to increase the maximum penalty for “illegal” industrial action more than fivefold was blocked in the upper house of the state parliament. While the unions have proclaimed this a win, they did nothing to mobilise workers against the stepped-up fines, instead appealing to pro-business politicians, including the far-right Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, to vote down the bill.

In fact it is the unions that have facilitated the attacks of the Perrottet government. While they have not been able to entirely neutralise the unrest in the working class, they have so far kept it confined to sporadic strikes by individual sections of workers. They have not mobilised workers in opposition to the fines because they rely upon them, as they do every aspect of Australia’s harsh industrial laws, as a pretext to shut down workers’ demands for strikes.

The campaign to illegalise strike action is motivated by the need to suppress working-class opposition to the slashing of jobs and wages, and the imposition of harsh cuts and privatisation of vital social services.

The unions falsely claim that this agenda is unique to Perrottet and the Liberal-Nationals and promote the lie that workers’ issues will be resolved through the election of Labor at next year’s NSW election. This is most sharply expressed by the NSWNMA and NSWTF, which have transformed long-running struggles of workers into open campaigns for Labor, despite the party’s hostility to workers’ demands.

In response to workers’ anger over NSW Labor leader Chris Minns’ repeated denunciations of rail stoppages, RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens has been forced to make limited criticisms of Labor, including admitting they were on a “unity ticket” with the Liberal-Nationals on the question of rail workers. Nevertheless, the RTBU continues to promote Labor, with Claassens declaring earlier this month he was “determined to get rid of a Perrottet rotten government.” Claassens is himself a prominent Labor Party member.

The truth is that Labor, at both the state and federal level, is preparing to deepen the assault on the working class. Federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers is now warning that workers face another two years of cuts to real wages, as part of the “tough medicine” he previously prescribed.

The Opal machine plan was pushed by the RTBU on the basis of a fraudulent conception that rail workers could only win support from the travelling public by allowing them to ride for free. In addition to a barrage of hysterical verbal attacks from the government, rail workers have faced a campaign by the corporate media to whip up an atmosphere of anger from

passengers inconvenienced by sporadic industrial action. The RTBU has played along completely, attempting to drum into workers the notion that the “public” opposes their struggle.

In reality, there is broad support among public transport users for the rail workers’ fight for passenger safety, job security and against cuts to real wages. The entire working class confronts an assault as governments and big business seek to impose further austerity amid soaring inflation and a breakdown of the global financial system.

In the public transport sector, as in other vital areas including health and education, the escalating crisis will only accelerate the already relentless agenda of cost cutting and privatisation. The unions stand ready to enforce every demand of governments and big business, just as they have done in one restructure after another over decades.

To defeat this onslaught, what is required is not another public relations stunt dressed up as industrial action, but a fight to mount a unified counter-offensive against the deepening attacks on working-class jobs, pay, conditions and social rights. To carry this out, workers will need to build new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions.

Above all, what is required is a fight for a socialist perspective, to end the subordination of the needs of workers to the demands of the wealthy elite. To stop the relentless privatisation drive, workers must fight to place critical public services, including railways, hospitals and schools, as well as the major corporations and banks, under full public ownership and democratic workers’ control as part of a broader struggle to reorganise society to meet social need, not private profit.



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