

Australia: More than 800 rail freight drivers locked out by Pacific National

Martin Scott
25 November 2022

Freight rail company Pacific National effectively locked out around 850 train drivers indefinitely from midnight Wednesday.

This aggressive action comes a week after tugboat operator Svitzer threatened a nationwide lockout of its workforce, a provocative manoeuvre designed to compel the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to order a six-month ban on all industrial action at the company.

The move by Pacific National, undoubtedly emboldened by the success of Svitzer's operation, is a further indication that the basic rights of workers to oppose attacks on their pay and conditions are under assault from all sections of the ruling class.

The company is the largest coal and grain transport operation in New South Wales (NSW), meaning the action will have a major impact across the state. According to the *Newcastle Herald*, a Pacific National spokesperson said the shutdown raised "the potential for coal shortages at power stations in the Hunter Valley."

Workers were informed late Wednesday "Pacific National will not accept the performance of any work" by drivers who proceeded with limited industrial action called by the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) as part of negotiations over a new enterprise agreement.

The latest protected industrial action consisted of drivers refusing to operate trains that were not fitted with the necessary safety equipment to meet "minimum safety standards," according to the union. RTBU Locomotive Division secretary Farren Campbell said the company had told workers, "if you're not going to drive everything, you're not driving any at all."

In response to Pacific National's notice, the RTBU advised drivers to refuse to attend work for an indefinite period, as a legally protected retaliatory industrial action.

While Pacific National disputes the use of the term "lockout," the message to workers was clear—any form of industrial disruption, even that which is supposedly "protected," will not be tolerated, and the company is prepared to blow up operations to ensure that it does not proceed.

A Fair Work Commission (FWC) supervised conciliation hearing between Pacific National and the RTBU yesterday did not resolve the issue. The FWC began proceedings this

morning on an application by Pacific National for the pro-business industrial court to "deal with" the enterprise bargaining dispute.

Pacific National only took its harsh action because it knew it would face no opposition from the RTBU.

Throughout the dispute, the union has ensured that industrial action has been minimal, restricted mostly to bans on overtime, working on rostered days off and operating certain types or configurations of train. Even these limited actions have been repeatedly called off, on the pretext of union claims of a "change in attitude" by the company or "progress" in negotiations.

The company is offering a four-year agreement containing 4 percent per annum pay "rises," far below the official inflation rate of 7.3 percent, which is itself a vast understatement of the rising cost of living. The RTBU declared on October 7 that this wage-slashing offer was "worthy of taking to members."

The union's only difference with the company on pay is that it is seeking a 2 percent pay increase on expiry of the agreement and a one-off \$4,000 "Pandemic Gratitude Payment." The union is not demanding that the initial pay rise be backdated to May, when the existing agreement expired. Instead the RTBU is backing Pacific National's offer of a 2 percent increase to take effect when workers vote "yes" and a further 2 percent when the agreement is certified. The purpose of this is to pressure workers into approving the deal to avoid a delay in receiving the meagre pay "rise."

The union reported on August 24 that "delegates have worked on a number of rostering issues to provide Pacific National with productivity gains." In other words, in exchange for a paltry sub-inflationary pay increase, the RTBU is working with the company to impose cuts to hard-won working conditions in order to drive up profits.

Now, the union is seeking to ensure that there is no coordinated, collective response by workers to the effective lockout. Aside from a limited rally in Newcastle yesterday, the union's advice has simply been for the affected workers to stay home. There, they will receive no pay, likely compelling some to return on the company's terms. Meanwhile the union is doing nothing to mobilise other workers at Pacific National, covered by separate agreements, or rail staff more broadly.

This is part of a broader operation of suppression and division by the RTBU across the freight and passenger railways, as it seeks to impose sell-out deals meeting company and government demands.

This month, the RTBU and Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) have visited Pacific National depots in Queensland promoting real wage slashing deals for intermodal and terminal workers.

In NSW, the RTBU this week called off partial stoppages by passenger railway workers after the state government agreed to make travel free across the network. The action was only called due to the hostile response of workers to the NSW government's federal court action to shut down a plan for workers to disable fare collection machines, and to a sub-inflationary enterprise agreement "counter-offer" put forward by the RTBU that was virtually indistinguishable from the government's offer.

As in the Pacific National disputes, the RTBU has ensured industrial action has been kept to a minimum throughout the 18-month dispute, with only a handful of partial stoppages and no mass rallies. Workers in different sections of rail have been completely isolated, much less nurses, health staff and other workers involved in disputes.

The RTBU, like all the unions, the Labor government and big business, is determined to prevent an eruption of the class struggle as growing numbers of workers demand industrial action in opposition to cuts to real wages and conditions as the cost of living soars.

It is for this reason that the maritime unions, Labor and Svitzer were united in celebrating last week's FWC ruling. While Labor and the tugboat operator had argued for industrial action to be terminated entirely, and for a new agreement to be imposed through arbitration, the six-month suspension will achieve the same result.

Svitzer is free to continue its operations and profits without interruption, including its application to terminate the existing enterprise agreement covering its workers, slashing their pay in half and eliminating hard-won working conditions.

Meanwhile, workers have their hands completely tied. If Svitzer's bid to terminate their agreement is unsuccessful, and if workers refuse to accept the company's rotten proposed offer and endure a further six-month pay freeze—on top of almost four years already—any industrial action they call after the ban will doubtless be met with another lockout, and a FWC order for compulsory arbitration.

This predicament, from which there is no means for workers to escape without accepting major cuts to pay and conditions, is what the unions describe as a "victory."

The Pacific National lockout is a further sign that Australian workers, no less than their counterparts overseas, face full-throated class warfare. In one dispute after another, including at plasterboard producer Knauf and plastics manufacturer Qenos, companies are responding to any level of "protected" industrial

action by locking out workers.

This sharp escalation in the attacks on workers is part of the demands of the corporate elite to impose the costs of corporate handouts during the pandemic, escalating military spending and the deepening crisis of world capitalism on the working class.

This is what federal Labor treasurer Jim Chalmers means when he raises continually that workers will have to make "sacrifices" in order to "boost productivity." Any, even limited work conditions, such as job permanency are to be destroyed as the global financial markets preside over a race to the bottom aimed at returning social conditions to those that existed in the 1930s.

The federal Labor government is well aware that this agenda will provoke mounting opposition from workers, under conditions where significant struggles are already emerging. That is why it is attempting to ram new industrial relations legislation through parliament that will further limit the right to strike, and grant the FWC stepped-up powers to intervene in disputes and impose the demands of big business.

In order to oppose the assault on pay, conditions and basic democratic and workplace rights, workers at Pacific National and throughout the working class need to make a conscious break with the unions and Labor and form new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees.

Such committees are the only means of defeating the sell-out operations of the unions and preparing a genuine industrial and political counter-offensive of the working class against attacks such as those at Pacific National and Svitzer. Above all, these ruthless and provocative moves underscore the fact that workers are in a struggle against capitalism and all of the political forces that defend it, raising the need for an alternative socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact