

Australia: Oppose sell-out rail deal in New South Wales!

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28 November 2022

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced on Friday it had reached an in-principle agreement with the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government in a protracted enterprise bargaining dispute on the state-owned passenger railway network.

The deal, hailed as a “victory” by the union bureaucracy, will deliver substantial cuts to real wages. The agreement contains pay “rises” of just 2.53 percent in the first year and 3.03 percent in the second, far below the official inflation rate of 7.3 percent. The offer of a \$4,500 signing bonus does not make up for massive increases in the cost of living and, because it is a one-off payment rather than a pay increase, will leave workers far behind inflation for years to come.

RTBU and other union officials have attempted to shut down workers’ criticism of the wage-slashing deal by claiming that these are only minimum figures, and may increase through arbitration in the Fair Work Commission (FWC). The question of backpay for the first year after the previous agreement expired at the end of April 2021 also will be decided by the FWC.

The conception that the pro-business industrial court will order the NSW government to increase its pay offer by any significant amount without major concessions is a fairytale. The union leadership is promoting this fiction, not just to cover over the wage cuts, but to suppress any discussion of the broader implications of this arbitration. Workers will soon be urged to approve an agreement that is incomplete, with the details to be determined through opaque legal proceedings *after* the vote.

The RTBU has provided few details of precisely which matters will be left up to the FWC, but has told members that, in addition to pay, these will include rostering arrangements and whether station staff will be entitled to hazardous waste allowances.

The in-principle agreement confirms what has become increasingly clear as the 18-month dispute has progressed: The RTBU bureaucracy was ready to sign workers up to any deal, however rotten, as long as the government agreed to make safety modifications to the New Intercity Fleet (NIF).

This can only be interpreted as a sell-out. Workers should not have to reach into their own pockets to ensure the safety of passengers!

There can be no doubt. The RTBU bureaucracy is preparing a betrayal, and the clock is ticking. As a first step, NSW rail workers should reject this wage-cutting agreement, but in order to prevent a sell-out, they have to take matters into their own hands.

In one dispute after another, across the country and around the world, workers have been determined to fight for decent wages and conditions. But to do so they must break the stranglehold of union apparatuses, which function as the industrial police force of corporations and governments.

Workers have to build genuine organisations of struggle, democratic rank-and-file committees, to defeat the sabotage and sell-outs by the union bureaucrats and return power to the hands of ordinary workers.

Without a word of consultation with its membership, the union liquidated industrial action planned for next week. RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens declared: “This win for workers means there is no need for the industrial action planned for next week.”

Compelled by the fury of workers to outline a calendar of limited action at the beginning of the month, the union had already included a “get out of jail free card” for Premier Dominic Perrottet, promising to withdraw industrial action if the government made rail travel free.

This followed the farcical Opal reader saga—workers, who had already voted overwhelmingly to strike, were forced to undertake a drawn-out balloting procedure to demonstrate their support for a token action designed to cause minimal disruption. This proved to be entirely futile as the union leadership withdrew the action when the government began legal proceedings.

Throughout the dispute, the union leaders have restricted workers to sporadic, isolated and limited stoppages and other work bans, which they repeatedly called off or watered down at the last minute.

Rail workers have refused to operate the NIF trains since the first sets were delivered in 2019, because of serious concerns over passenger safety and driver workload. The trains were explicitly designed for driver-only operations as part of a government drive to eliminate the role of guards, which would slash around 450 jobs.

Workers demanded modifications to the trains to move video screens out of the drivers' eyeline to a panel that can be monitored by guards. In addition, they asked for changes to the doors to allow guards to lean out of the train and view the platform with the naked eye, rather than relying exclusively on inadequate cameras.

While the RTBU leadership claims to have extracted from the government a written commitment to NIF modifications, there are major loopholes:

- According to the union, the new fleet will be pressed into service even before the alterations are made, under an “interim operating model” requiring two guards on each train.
- The agreement has only guaranteed the positions of guards and other workers on the NIF for four years.

This can only be seen as a win for the Liberal-National government. It will promote the NIF go-ahead as a symbol of its capacity to overcome workers’ unrest, an important signal to big business and the corporate media ahead of the March 2023 state election.

For workers, nothing has been gained. The jobs of 450 guards remain on the chopping block, merely with a four-year stay of execution.

The agreement does nothing to address the broader questions of automation (including driver-only or driverless operations) and privatisation. Rail is the only mode of mass transport in NSW that has not been sold

off, a process that was initiated by Labor governments and facilitated by the RTBU. The union bureaucracy already has allowed sections of the railways to be transformed into the privately operated and driverless Metro system—leaving a clear path for the further destruction of jobs and critical public infrastructure.

The union-government deal is entirely in line with Labor’s agenda at both the state and federal level. NSW Labor leader Chris Minns repeatedly denounced industrial action by rail workers and said wage increases must be tied to increased “productivity,” that is, cuts to jobs and conditions.

The federal Labor government has insisted that workers must make “sacrifices” in the form of declining real wages and cuts to social spending. The industrial relations legislation currently being rushed through parliament is not, as Labor and the unions claim, about boosting wages, but about eviscerating the already limited rights of workers to strike.

This includes granting stepped-up powers to the FWC to declare disputes “intractable,” ban industrial action and impose agreements through arbitration.

In order to fight the onslaught on wages, conditions and basic democratic and industrial rights, workers on the railways and throughout the working class face a political struggle against Labor, the union bureaucracies, the industrial courts and the capitalist system itself.

What is posed is the need for 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. The only way to oppose ongoing pro-business restructuring is to place the railways, along with other vital public assets, under democratic workers’ ownership and control.

The SEP stands ready to assist rail workers in the formation of rank-and-file committees to break out of the union straitjacket and develop this counter-offensive.



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