

# Australian unions ram through sell-out deal for NSW rail workers

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The Fair Work Commission (FWC) last week approved a new enterprise agreement to cover workers on the state-owned passenger railway network in Sydney and throughout New South Wales (NSW). The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) hailed this as a “great win for workers and commuters.” In fact, the union-management deal will cut wages in real terms and provides only a temporary promise that jobs will not be slashed on the New Intercity Fleet (NIF).

The agreement contains nominal wage rises of 2.53 percent from May 2022, and 3.03 percent from May 2023, plus a one-off payment of \$4,500. With inflation officially at 7.8 percent, and the cost of essential goods and services rising even more rapidly, this represents a massive cut to real wages.

Conscious of substantial opposition to the paltry wage offer, the union bureaucracy told workers the pay “rises” contained within the agreement were merely “minimum” figures, with a higher sum to be determined through arbitration in the pro-business FWC.

Acknowledging the inadequacy of the pay deal, RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens declared late last month it was “an outcome essential workers will not accept.” Incredibly, this statement came *after* the union bureaucracy had pushed through a “yes” vote, eliminating any legal right of workers to oppose the slashing of their wages.

Other critical aspects of the deal are also yet to be determined, including changes to rostering arrangements, which will be subject to another three months of negotiation before potentially being referred to the FWC.

In other words, workers were asked to vote on an “agreement” in which vital elements had not been determined. This is in line with the way the union bureaucracy has conducted the whole protracted dispute. Workers were forced to vote blindfolded after having their hands tied behind their backs for months, with the union refusing to carry out any meaningful industrial action since the end of August.

The union’s claim that the pro-business industrial court will order the NSW government to increase its pay offer by any significant amount is a lie. Since its establishment in 2009 by the union-backed Rudd Labor government, the role of the FWC has been to shut down industrial disputes, strip workers of any right to strike, and to impose the demands of corporations and

governments for harsh cuts to wages and conditions.

With both management and the union leaders calling for a “yes” vote, and with the bureaucracy having made abundantly clear that it would not call any substantial industrial action, workers could see no way forward and begrudgingly accepted the sell-out deal.

The NIF was a central issue in the dispute. The new fleet of trains, originally planned to enter service in 2019, were explicitly designed for driver-only operation. The elimination of guards would enable Sydney Trains to slash some 450 jobs as part of ongoing restructuring operations to cut costs and prepare for further privatisation. This would also dramatically increase the workload of drivers, who would be required to monitor a bank of closed-circuit television (CCTV) screens when approaching and leaving stations—effectively serving double duty as driver and guard.

In addition to the increased workload, workers were concerned that the cameras are unable to detect small children, prams or other low subjects, and are unreliable in inclement weather. They called for the trains to be modified, to take the CCTV screens out of drivers’ line of sight, and enable guards to open their doors and directly observe the platform as the train arrived and departed, in addition to checking the monitors.

Eventually, the NSW government agreed to implement safety modifications demanded by workers, but, with the collaboration of the union bureaucracy, made this conditional upon workers accepting the wage-slashing enterprise agreement.

The NIF deal, presented by the union bureaucracy as the crowning achievement of the dispute, is not in fact a win for workers, but a concession. Workers had already prevented the new trains from entering service through their refusal to crew them since deliveries began in 2019.

The deal in fact sets out the parameters through which the NIF can be put into service. The RTBU claims it has extracted “a 4-year guarantee” that station staff, on-boarders, guards and repeaters will keep their jobs on the NIF. In other words, by 2027, the government can simply reverse the modifications and proceed with the slashing of jobs.

The agreement retains clauses facilitating ongoing restructuring, including “the elimination or reduction of job opportunities,” as long as this is carried out in “consultation”

with the unions.

Over the past two decades, the RTBU has overseen the privatisation of every other mode of public transport in NSW, which has resulted in the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions. Sydney's passenger railways are already being privatised in piecemeal fashion, through the expansion of the driverless Metro system. The sell-off process was kicked off by Labor with the 2004 Unsworth review.

The agreement comes after an almost two-year dispute characterised by threats, provocations and denunciations by the Liberal-National state government, and collaboration, capitulation and betrayal from the leadership of the RTBU and the rest of the Combined Rail Unions (CRU).

On February 21 last year, the government shut down the entire rail network without warning and attempted to blame workers for the chaos and confusion that ensued, even accusing them of "terrorist-like" activity. The RTBU bureaucracy swooped in to ensure service was quickly restored and defuse the political fallout from what the broader working class quickly recognised was a provocation.

Although workers had voted overwhelmingly in favour of strikes in January, the RTBU leadership ensured that industrial action was restricted to a handful of partial stoppages and limited work bans. By August, the anger and frustration of workers was such that the bureaucracy was compelled to call more substantive action, but isolated stoppages to individual sections of the network, minimising disruption and avoiding mass action by the broader workforce.

Despite the limited character of stoppages by rail workers, Premier Dominic Perrottet and other senior ministers repeatedly denounced the striking workers. At the end of August, Perrottet threatened to tear up the existing enterprise agreement covering rail workers, slashing hard-won conditions and pay, if there was any further disruption to rail service.

The unions readily complied with this ultimatum and no further stoppages were carried out, with workers forced to watch from the sidelines as the bureaucracy mired the dispute in multiple court cases.

In wrapping up this longstanding dispute ahead of the March 25 state election, the unions have provided an important service for both Labor and the Liberal-Nationals. The parliamentary parties are equally determined to prove to the corporate elite that they are capable of shutting down any further industrial action and class unrest, as cost-of-living pressures on workers escalate.

State Labor leader Chris Minns made clear on multiple occasions last year that he opposed industrial action by rail workers. Yesterday, Minns was quick to deny Liberal-National claims that a Labor government would increase public sector wages in line with inflation, saying, "I don't know what they're modelling, but it's not Labor policy."

This is in line with the agenda of the federal Labor government to slash real wages and social spending, in order to

impose upon the working class the full burden of the massive handouts to big business during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the escalation of military expenditure.

The election of a NSW Labor government next month does not present a way forward for workers in rail or any other sector. Labor, along with the union apparatus, represent the interests of the financial and corporate elite, not the working class.

The RTBU bureaucracy's wage-slashing enterprise agreement, and the protracted series of betrayals that led to it, is a stark reminder that workers cannot advance their interests within the stranglehold of this or any other union.

Last year was marked by mass strikes throughout the NSW public sector, including by teachers, health workers and bus drivers, against the 2.5 percent annual wage rise cap, introduced by Labor in 2008. Despite the commonality of these struggles with that of rail workers, the RTBU bureaucracy, along with all the other unions involved, made sure that the disputes were kept separate.

To break this isolation, workers need to build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, in every workplace. These committees are the only means through which workers can democratically develop their own demands and link up across industries in a unified struggle.

These issues are sharply posed in the public sector, in NSW and elsewhere, because of the fundamental incompatibility of the capitalist profit system with the provision of high-quality essential public services.

What is required is a fight for workers' governments and the reorganisation of society along socialist lines, under which critical services, including transport, can be operated with decent wages and conditions for workers, and for the benefit of society as a whole, not wealthy shareholders and capitalist governments that do their bidding.

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