

Sydney rail workers to vote on industrial action against Labor's wage cuts

Martin Scott
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Passenger railway workers in Sydney and throughout New South Wales (NSW) will soon vote on whether to take industrial action, after the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) for a protected action ballot order last week.

Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workers are opposing a real-wage slashing enterprise agreement offer from the state Labor government, in line with its broader attack on public sector spending and wages.

The Labor government, led by Premier Chris Minns, is proposing a 3.5 percent nominal pay rise this year, with an additional 0.5 percent “for workers who have not received structural adjustments in the past 12 months, provided agreement is reached in a timely manner.” In other words, some workers would receive a small bonus if the offer is rammed through quickly without any disruption from strikes or other industrial action.

This would be followed by 3 percent increases in 2025 and 2026. Employer superannuation contributions would increase by 0.5 percent in each of the first two years, as is required by federal legislation. The offer also contains a so-called “cost-of-living protection” measure, a one-off payment of \$1,000 in any year that the consumer price index (CPI) exceeds 4.5 percent.

This arrangement would deliver an immediate real pay cut to rail workers. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) monthly inflation data show that the CPI rose 4 percent in the year to May, a figure that has increased each month since February.

In a video posted to the RTBU's Facebook page earlier this month, bargaining delegate Brendan Robinson noted that official inflation figures only tell part of the story. He said: “Australian rents surged 11.5 percent in 2023, and by as much as 15.6 percent in 2022,” and noted: “Sydney's house prices have increased by 97 percent in the last decade.”

The RTBU has advanced a demand for a four-year

agreement, with 8 percent (or CPI if higher) annual increases to pay and allowances. Even taken at face value, this falls far short of what is necessary to keep up with the soaring cost of living, let alone make up for previous losses.

The RTBU, which has brokered one wage-cutting deal after another over more than a decade, will not lead a serious fight even for this inadequate figure.

Robinson presented the wage claim in almost apologetic terms, repeatedly describing it as “modest.” In what amounted to a celebration of previous sell-outs, he bragged that the RTBU had “never made an outlandish claim.” He noted that, in the most recent (2021?2022) enterprise agreement (EA) negotiations, the rail unions had “asked for a mere 3.5 percent.”

In fact, the union bureaucracy repeatedly strangled any attempt by workers to fight for even this meagre sum. One planned industrial action after another was called off, and those that did proceed were brief stoppages limited on each occasion to different sections of the rail network.

In 2022, the NSW Liberal-National government came under immense pressure from public sector workers, with well over 100,000 nurses, teachers and others carrying out multiple mass strikes. The RTBU bureaucracy ensured that rail workers—a powerful section of the working class—were completely isolated from these disputes, and complied fully with then Premier Dominic Perrotet's demand that there be no industrial action that would “inconvenience” passengers.

In early 2023, with inflation well above 7 percent, the RTBU rammed through a deal containing a pay “increase” of just 2.53 percent for 2022 and 3.03 percent in 2023. The bureaucrats claimed the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC) would award a substantial pay rise through arbitration, to begin *after* the agreement was signed. Two months later, this amounted to a meagre 1 percent per annum above the existing deal.

Inadvertently pointing to the inadequacy of the previous RTBU-government deal, Robinson said: “In 2022, inflation went up over 7 percent, this year it is still over 4.1 percent. Rail workers’ pay, over that time, only went up by 7 percent. In addition, our members have had to put up with pay freezes both before and after this EA and the previous one.”

The 2021-2023 RTBU sell-out operation was not the exception, but the rule.

In 2018, the RTBU rammed through a regressive deal for Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workers in the face of substantial opposition. In exchange for a meagre 3 percent per annum wage rise, workers were forced to accept numerous attacks on their conditions, including increased scrutiny of sick leave, reduced notice periods for redundancies, and consolidation (i.e., job cuts) of signalling operations.

In direct opposition to an overwhelming strike vote by workers, the RTBU carried out a campaign of isolation and suppression engineered to wear workers down in a drawn-out series of toothless sporadic work bans until they begrudgingly accepted a rotten union-management deal.

In an attempt to sweep these and other previous experiences under the rug, Robinson, serving as the mouthpiece of the RTBU bureaucracy, insists that the declining wages and conditions of rail workers are the result of, “over a decade of trying to bargain under the previous government’s austerity pay cap.” The message to workers is that, under a new, Labor, government, things will be different.

This is fraudulent on multiple counts. While legislated by the O’Farrell Liberal-National government in 2011, the 2.5 percent pay cap originated as Labor Party policy. In fact, in 2008, the RTBU was the first union to agree to the cap, paving the way for its broader application.

Furthermore, despite the nominal removal of the pay cap, since coming to office in March 2023, the Minns government has slashed real wages throughout the public sector, in line with the austerity agenda of Labor at federal and state level across the country.

The claim also ignores the historic attacks by Labor governments on rail and other public infrastructure. From 1995 to 2011, successive NSW Labor governments closed dozens of rail facilities, including maintenance workshops and track repair divisions, and slashed thousands of jobs. This was part of a broader program to sell-off large sections of public infrastructure, including the state’s electricity distribution network.

The passenger rail network is the only mode of mass transit in NSW still under public ownership. While there is no evidence of immediate plans to sell off the trains, privatisation is being carried out by stealth. Virtually all expansion and modernisation of Sydney’s railways is part of the Metro project, a privately-owned service that uses automated trains, eliminating the jobs of drivers, guards and many station staff.

The decimation of public transport in Sydney and throughout Australia could not have been carried out without the complete and ongoing collaboration of the union apparatus.

These experiences underscore that rail workers cannot advance a struggle for real improvements to wages and conditions from within the stranglehold of the RTBU bureaucracy.

To avoid yet another sell-out, workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, led by workers, not bureaucrats, must be built in every workplace as a venue for workers to democratically prepare a fighting plan of action to achieve demands based on what workers need, not what the government or the union says is possible.

Through these committees, rail workers can link up with the hundreds of thousands of public sector workers across the state, who confront the same assault on the wages and living conditions, along with other transport workers and broader sections of the working class.

Defeating this will require a political struggle with the Labor government, to which the RTBU and other unions are intimately tied.

Above all, what is required is an alternative socialist perspective and a fight to place railways, along with other vital public assets including schools and hospitals, as well as the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control as part of the broader reorganisation of society to meet social need, not private profit.



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