

# Australian rail unions “excruciatingly close” to sellout deal with NSW Labor government

Martin Scott  
7 February 2025

The unions covering rail workers in Sydney and New South Wales (NSW) have announced that a handful of limited work bans will resume next week, as the nine-month enterprise bargaining dispute with the state government continues.

The Labor government is seeking to impose a 14 percent nominal pay rise over four years, of which 1 percent would come from cost savings—that is, job cuts and increased workload—elsewhere in the rail organisation. This is barely higher than the official rate of inflation and falls far short of what is needed to make up for losses incurred in previous union-government agreements.

The government also wants to remove clauses in the existing enterprise agreement relating to union consultation and the introduction of new technology, which have previously been used to block the destruction of jobs through the elimination of guards on the New Intercity Fleet.

The rail unions initially advanced a demand for a 32 percent pay rise over four years. But their “counter-offer” late last month, whether for 20 percent, as the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) claims, or less, as was reported in the media, makes clear that they are preparing to ram through a real-wage slashing sellout. This is underscored by RTBU NSW secretary Toby Warnes’ statement last week that the government and the union are “excruciatingly close” to a deal.

The RTBU has called for drivers to reduce speed by 23 kilometres per hour in 80km/h and over zones, a ban on serving alcohol on regional trains, and a ban on non-safety critical incident reports. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) announced rolling one-hour stoppages on February 12.

These actions are stunts, designed to cause minimal disruption, in line with the grovelling promise made by the union last month to scuttle the Labor government’s attempt to have the Fair Work Commission (FWC) ban industrial action by rail workers altogether.

The RTBU bureaucracy explained in a letter to members: “Given the Government’s willingness to commence legal action of any kind against us with no notice, it’s important

that we focus our actions on exerting political pressure.”

In fact, the toothless measures called by the union place the government under no pressure whatsoever. Demonstrating this, Labor declined the union’s offer to drop the speed reduction action if passengers were refunded for travel in the week of January 13–17, when delays and cancellations across the rail network were blamed on industrial action. Instead, the government says it will provide a partial refund, but only after the dispute is settled.

The RTBU bureaucracy has made similar conditional offers with almost every substantive action it has called throughout this dispute. This has given the government total control over whether industrial action demanded and voted for by workers was actually carried out, without having to meet a single one of their demands.

The pretext behind these “get out of jail free cards” is that rail workers need to get the “public” on side by forcing the Labor government to provide discounted or free fares, or 24-hour service on weekends.

Despite the limited character of industrial action called by the unions throughout the dispute, and the bureaucrats’ repeated capitulations, rail workers have been subjected to a vicious media-government propaganda campaign.

The RTBU bureaucracy claims that these slanderous attacks can and must be reversed through legal manoeuvres and appeals to Labor politicians.

On January 24, Warnes wrote a letter to two NSW Labor backbenchers, asking them to explain how their remarks criticising the rail unions during the dispute “align with the principles and mission of the NSW Labor Party.”

On February 4, the RTBU described the resignation of Transport Minister Jo Haylen as “both a threat and an opportunity,” suggesting that whoever replaces her might suddenly deliver workers’ demands. This is a fraud.

Haylen has played a frontline role in the attack against rail workers, including her statement in December that “no amount of industrial action is tolerable.” These were not the actions of a rogue individual, but of a representative of Labor’s pro-business agenda of wage cuts and austerity, not

just for rail workers and the public sector, but the entire working class.

The precise circumstances of her departure remain murky. The ostensible reason for her resignation, use of the government car service for social outings, was not illegal, did not violate government policy, and is basically standard practice.

As is so often the case with political scandals, Haylen's winery jaunt provided a pretext for her to be forced out. It is probable that the real motivating factor was her failure to swiftly wrap up the protracted rail dispute, with on-again-off-again industrial action causing consternation for big business and disrupting their plans for an end to working-from-home arrangements.

Whatever the precise behind-the-scenes machinations that led to Haylen's resignation, it can be stated for certain that they had nothing whatsoever to do with adopting a more conciliatory attitude to rail workers. Her replacement will have the same mission: Push through an enterprise agreement that delivers further cuts to rail workers' real wages and conditions, and continue to aggressively pursue the job-slashing privatisation of transport in NSW.

These diversions are designed by the union bureaucracy to promote illusions among rail workers that Labor's hostility to their struggle is a mistake or an aberration, unique to the NSW government, or even to individuals within it. In fact, the NSW Labor government's attack on the wages, conditions and democratic rights of rail workers is part of a broader assault on the working class, at the state and federal level.

Workers throughout the NSW public sector were offered the same real-wage slashing 9.5 percent over three year pay "rise" originally presented to rail workers in 2024. Tens of thousands, including nurses and midwives, as well as psychiatrists, are still trying determinedly to fight, despite the efforts of the union bureaucracies to shut them down and impose the Labor's government's rotten deal.

The NSW Labor government has, with the cooperation of the union bureaucracies, used the industrial courts to ban strikes and other industrial action by rail and health workers. The federal Labor government, along with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), played a key role in creating the conditions for the FWC to rule picketing "unlawful" in the November-December strike involving 1,800 Woolworths warehouse workers.

In August, the federal Labor government carried out the most blatant attack on workers' democratic rights in decades, placing the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) under administration. Again, this action, placing the capacity of 80,000 building workers to fight attacks on

their wages and conditions in the hands of a state-appointed dictator, was done with the full-throated support of the ACTU.

When Haylen declared "no amount of industrial action is tolerable," this was not a personal opinion, pertaining only to rail workers in NSW. This is the attitude of Labor and the entire political establishment to the working class as a whole.

It is on the basis of building a unified counter-offensive against this Labor-led assault on wages, conditions and workplace rights that rail workers can make a powerful appeal to other sections of workers.

This has nothing in common with the union bureaucracy's concerns over "reputational damage" and insistence on the need to get the "public" on side. These are diversions, meant to conceal from workers the fact that the union leadership is working closely with the Labor government to cook up a sell-out deal behind closed doors.

The necessary joint struggle cannot be built within the framework of the unions, whose *modus operandi* is to isolate workers, suppress their demands for industrial action, and impose sell-out deals in line with the demands of governments and big business.

This means workers need new organisations of struggle. Rank-and-file committees, run by workers, not highly paid bureaucrats, must be built in every rail depot and workplace, as well as in hospitals, throughout the public sector, and more broadly. This is the means through which workers can take matters into their own hands and fight for demands based on their actual needs, not what bureaucrats, management or governments say is affordable or possible.

Through rank-and-file committees, rail workers can democratically plan and implement an uncompromising campaign of industrial action, including strikes, with no easy-outs for the government. But this is only one component of what must be a political struggle, involving the broadest layers of the working class, against the Labor government, the industrial courts and the capitalist system itself.

Above all, what is required is a fight for a socialist perspective, in which transport and other vital public infrastructure, as well as the banks and big corporations, are placed under democratic workers' control and ownership, to serve the needs of the entire working class, not increase the profits of the wealthy few.



To contact the WWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wws.org/contact](https://wws.org/contact)**