

Australia: Rail, Tram and Bus Union isolates striking NSW rail workers

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On Tuesday afternoon, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced its latest liquidation of industrial action, declaring a planned “go-slow” measure would be “postponed” for 48 hours to allow further negotiation with the state Labor government.

Under the proposed measure, originally slated to be in place for two weeks, train drivers were to reduce their speed by 23 kilometres per hour in 80km/h and over zones.

An RTBU letter to members stated that, following a meeting with the Treasurer and interim Transport Minister, the union leadership “agreed that the bargain was so close and that we may be able to land it in the next 48 hours.”

Rail workers beware! What is “close” is a union-government in-principle agreement containing further cuts to real wages and conditions, which the RTBU and other rail union leaderships will seek to ram through as quickly as possible.

The latest “offer” from the Labor government was for a 14 percent nominal pay rise over four years, of which 1 percent would come from cost savings. This 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 postponement and stepped-up backroom negotiations with the Labor government were clearly designed to undermine a rally and one-hour rolling stoppages by rail workers covered by the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) yesterday. Under the control of the ETU bureaucracy, the rally, outside NSW Parliament, was itself a stunt consisting of plaintive appeals to Labor Premier Chris Minns, but the fact that it was held reflects the determination of rail workers to fight Labor’s attacks on their wages and conditions.

According to the RTBU bureaucracy, the go-slow was called off as “an act of goodwill,” after the government agreed to “withdraw their s.471 notices for 48 hours.”

Under Section 471 of the draconian Fair Work Act, employers can refuse to accept any work from (and therefore not pay) workers who plan to engage in “protected” industrial action, however limited. Section 471 also allows the employer to reduce workers’ wages if they participate in partial work bans but are not sent home. In both cases, all an employer need do is notify workers in writing that such retaliatory action will be taken.

In other words, the Labor government planned to lock out or dock the wages of workers who took part in industrial action that was explicitly designed to cause minimal disruption. RTBU’s contention that the temporary withdrawal of this punitive and repressive measure warranted a single drop of “goodwill,” let alone a total capitulation that rendered the government’s backdown entirely moot, should be a stark warning for rail workers.

This is not the first time in this dispute the Labor government has utilised or threatened these harsh measures. In the first weeks of this year, around 170 rail workers had their pay docked, by an average of \$255 per shift, allegedly because they took part in a ban on working on trains or facilities cleaned by third-party contractors, according to the *Daily Telegraph*.

In December, rail workers were threatened with a Section 471 lockout if they participated in a partial work ban limiting the number of kilometres they would travel. The RTBU leadership responded by advising workers to attend work as normal, effectively liquidating the “protected” industrial action measure.

The Labor government has also sought on multiple occasions to have the Fair Work Commission shut down industrial action in the dispute entirely. Each time, the union bureaucrats—including the ETU leadership—have responded by calling off planned actions, giving the government exactly what it wanted and fraudulently telling workers this was the only way to “win.”

At other stages in the dispute, the Labor government was not required to take such an aggressive stance, as the RTBU bureaucracy helpfully provided an escape clause with every

substantive proposed action.

The RTBU bureaucracy is desperately seeking to play down and cover over the Labor government's intense hostility to the interests of rail workers. This is underscored in the latest letter to members with the statements that "the Government [i.e., not Sydney Trains] is the real decision maker," and that "we firmly have the ear and attention of both the Transport Minister and the Treasurer."

The reality is that the NSW Labor government is not only seeking to slash the real wages and conditions of rail workers, but the entire public sector, including nurses, midwives and psychiatrists. This is part of a broader assault on the working class as a whole, spearheaded by Labor at the state and federal level around the country.

ETU NSW President Glen Potter, speaking at the rally yesterday, denounced the RTBU leadership for "negotiating in parliament behind our backs." But neither he nor the other speakers offered workers any alternative to the dead-end road of appeals to the Labor government.

ETU NSW Secretary Allen Hicks called on "Minns to sit with unions and negotiate a fair outcome," while two Greens members of parliament invited to speak by the union, Jenny Leong and Abigail Boyd, both told workers to shout louder so the parliamentarians inside could hear their pleas.

The ETU's promotion of the Greens is a clear attempt to ensure that workers' opposition to the Labor Party is contained within the parliamentary framework, tied to a political party that represents the interests of the upper middle class and whose entire orientation is to operating as a de facto coalition partner of Labor.

Hicks' rhetorical question, "why do we have a Labor government in power if they aren't going to respect and reward the workers?," was clearly intended to promote the fraudulent conception that the NSW government is some sort of anomaly, not carrying out the agenda of Labor and the ruling class as a whole.

This is particularly egregious given the ETU's prominent role as an ally of the ousted Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) construction division bureaucracy, who were sacked en masse last August when the federal Labor government placed the union under administration. Notably, this blatant attack on the wages, conditions and democratic rights of building workers was not even mentioned at yesterday's rally.

The ETU bureaucrats also did not at any stage mention a concrete wage demand, a clear sign that they will not hesitate to push through a sell-out deal that falls far short of workers' initial demand for 8 percent per annum pay rises over four years. Defeating Labor's attempt to remove safety and job security clauses from the enterprise agreement is vital, but workers should not have to pay for this out of their

own wages.

Two main conclusions must be drawn from yesterday's rally, the first by ETU rail workers in almost three decades. First, that rail workers are determined to fight the attack on their wages and conditions. Second, that this is impossible within the framework of the ETU, RTBU or any other union bureaucracy, which are tightly integrated into the Labor Party and all of its governments.

This means rail workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers themselves, must be built in every depot and workplace to lead a fight for real improvements to wages and conditions.

A central task of these committees must be to tear down the walls of isolation imposed as a matter of course by the unions, exemplified in yesterday's rally involving workers covered by just one of the "combined rail unions." The rank-and-file committees must include workers in every section of the rail operation, whether they are currently union members or not.

More broadly, rail workers must make a powerful appeal to the broader layers of workers, throughout the NSW public sector and beyond, who all face a similar onslaught against their wages and conditions. To defeat these attacks, a fight must be taken up to build rank-and-file committees and a unified struggle against the Labor government and capitalism itself throughout the working class.

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, and operated to meet social need, not private profit.



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