Australian rail union conspires with state government, industrial courts, to force vote on sell-out deal

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The New South Wales (NSW) Labor government's latest miserly pay offer for rail workers will be put to a formal vote early next month, despite token objections from one of the seven unions involved in negotiating the Sydney Trains and NSW Trains enterprise agreement.

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) issued a voting order on Friday, in response to an application from the state-owned corporation, made at the urging of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), to overturn the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) veto and force a vote on the union-management deal.

The FWC ruling noted: "On 4 June 2025 at 10:43 am, the RTBU sent an email to the Commission on behalf of the CRU [Combined Rail Unions] stating that … the CRU had requested that Sydney Trains and NSW Trains proceed to secure written agreement to put the proposed agreement to employees for a vote."

In a member update on Friday, the RTBU hailed the ruling, stating it had been "successful in obtaining an order that the agreement be put to a vote of all members. In doing so, the Commission found that the ETU refusing to allow the agreement to got to a vote was unreasonable."

In other words, the RTBU bureaucracy, backed by the other five members of the CRU, conspired with management, the Labor government and the industrial courts against a section of the Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workforce covered by the ETU.

The RTBU leadership's celebration of its own anti-democratic actions and their approval by the pro-business FWC underscore its determination to suppress any opposition to its rotten deal with the Labor government. The resort to courtroom manoeuvres also reflects a certain urgency, with the strike ban imposed by the FWC in February set to expire at the end of this month.

The proposed union-management agreement, hailed as a "very positive development" by the RTBU on May 30, is in fact an attempt to sell workers out. After workers voted to fight for an 8 percent a year pay rise over four years, the RTBU is now seeking to push through a three-year deal containing 4 percent per annum increases, plus back pay to May 2024. That is scarcely higher than the current official inflation rate, and far short of what is required to make up for the real wage cuts imposed by previous union-brokered deals.

From June 23 to July 1, workers will be subjected to a "roadshow" by RTBU officials, telling them "what they stand to gain" from this rotten deal, in an attempt to ram through a "yes" vote on the agreement. The vote will take place from July 2 to July 5.

Rail workers should reject this sell-out union-management proposal! This means taking matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees need urgently to be built in every depot and workplace to lead this struggle. These committees must be democratically run by workers, not bureaucrats, and politically and organisationally independent from the unions and Labor.

In the first instance, these committees will need to lead a campaign for the broadest possible "no" vote in the formal enterprise agreement ballot. Discussions must be held with workers in every corner of the rail operation, to refute the lies and illusions peddled by management, the government and the union bureaucracy, that rejecting the "offer" will only lead to workers getting less.

The union bureaucracy intends for its "roadshows" to be a propaganda exercise. This cannot be tolerated! The rank-and-file committees must demand the right to make their case for a "no" vote in these workplace meetings and insist that the union leadership provides an explanation as to why workers' claims, above all for a 32

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percent wage rise, have been abandoned.

Rank-and-file workers should also demand that the unions call a network-wide stop-work meeting, to allow open discussion between workers throughout the organisation about the proposed agreement, and how to take forward their struggle, including through the reinstitution of industrial bans and strikes.

Such a campaign will require a fight against the union bureaucracy, which has sought throughout this dispute to sabotage and undermine the rail workers' struggle. One strike after another was called off, with the union repeatedly citing the "good faith" of a Labor government that wears its hostility to the struggles of workers as a badge of honour, and has waged a slanderous campaign against rail workers, with the full-throated support of the corporate media.

The conspiracy of the CRU with management, the Labor government and the FWC to push through a vote is a stark illustration of the lineup of forces that workers are up against. But rail workers should not harbour any illusions that the ETU bureaucracy represents an alternative perspective.

Two specific differences with the proposed agreement have been raised by the ETU.

The first, described by the FWC as "trivial," amounts to changing *five words* in a clause about the need to hold discussions in the coming months about the classification of a subset of workers in the *next* enterprise agreement—that is, the one to be negotiated in 2028.

The RTBU bureaucracy, despite its rush to impose the deal, rejected this change as a "demarcation dispute." That is, it believes the ETU is attempting to carry out an act the bureaucracy considers far more objectionable than any attack on workers' wages and conditions—poaching its members.

The second matter is a new claim, advanced by the ETU for the first time on June 2, arguing that changes in the proposed agreement will "disrupt the relativities [i.e., reduce the wage gap] between trade and non-trade positions," and calling for a commensurate rise for trade-based workers. This is a divisive claim, aimed at placating a small section of workers, while imposing a woefully inadequate deal on the broader workforce.

As the FWC ruling makes clear, "The ETU is content with and supports the wages outcome and each of the conditions contained in the agreement to be put to a vote." In other words, the ETU bureaucracy is just as ready as its counterparts in the other rail unions to sign off on a deal that will leave most Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workers worse off in real terms than they were six years ago.

The limited character of the ETU's differences with the other rail unions has been on display since the union declared its break with the CRU in February. At the February 12 strike rally, involving only rail workers covered by the ETU, this ETU leadership advanced the same bankrupt perspective as the rest of the CRU, issuing plaintive appeals to the Labor government to "come to the table."

While questions of coverage and wage relativities are undoubtedly a factor, the ETU leadership's opposition to the proposed agreement is fundamentally a stunt. Aware of growing opposition from workers, the bureaucracy is seeking to cover up its own role in preparing the sell-out.

The RTBU's determination to ram the deal through is motivated by the same fear. While the specific objections raised by the ETU bureaucracy are extremely limited, the RTBU is keenly aware that they reflect broader sentiments throughout the Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workforce.

Of even more concern to the union apparatus, this oppositional sentiment is by no means limited to the rail dispute. The attacks being carried out by the NSW Labor government against rail workers are mirrored throughout the public sector, in that state and around the country.

This underscores that voting "no" to the union-government sell-out is only the first step. Through rank-and-file committees, rail workers can make a powerful appeal to these broader sections of workers. To defeat the attack on jobs, wages, conditions and democratic rights, a fight must be taken up to build a network of rank-and-file committees throughout the working class and a unified struggle against the Labor government and the capitalist profit 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 further enrich the financial and corporate elite.

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