

Australia: NSW rail union calls limited industrial action after government rejects concessionary deal

Martin Scott

1 November 2022

Workers on the New South Wales (NSW) passenger rail network plan to resume industrial action this month, after the state government rejected a wage-slashing deal proposed by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU).

Yesterday, RTBU NSW Secretary Alex Claassens announced that the union would “have to resort to the traditional type of industrial action,” including several weeks of limited work bans, “ramping up” to a network-wide stoppage, likely of just a few hours, on December 2. The most significant of the November actions are two 24-hour bans on operating “fourth generation” trains, which will reduce the available fleet by around 70 percent.

The first action likely to cause substantial disruption to passenger operations is almost three weeks away, on November 21, a period which the union intends to use to stitch up a sell-out deal with management and the Liberal-National government. Claassens said yesterday that the only thing standing in the way of an agreement was the failure of “a government decision maker to sit at the table.”

Claassens noted that the Fair Work Commission (FWC) would “hopefully” make a decision within “two or three weeks” on the union’s application for a good faith bargaining order against the government. This indicates that the RTBU is hoping the anti-work industrial tribunal will intervene in the dispute and impose an agreement through arbitration.

Whether the agreement is brokered in backroom union-management discussions or ordered by the FWC, what is clear is that as long as this dispute is in the hands of the RTBU, rail workers confront a sell-out.

To avoid this, workers must take matters into their own hands as a matter of urgency. This means building new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, through which to democratically prepare a fighting plan of action to achieve demands based on what workers need, not what the government or the RTBU says is possible.

The fight for safety and job security cannot end with the

call for modifications to the New Intercity Fleet (NIF), critical though they are. The fact is the purchase of the NIF trains, which were explicitly designed to allow driver-only operation and the elimination of guards, was only one aspect of broader plans for mass sackings across the network.

The automation and privatisation of Sydney’s passenger railways is already well underway, with the rapidly expanding Metro system set to replace existing services between Bankstown and the CBD within two or three years. This, along with the privatisation of every other mode of mass transportation in NSW, has been presided over by the RTBU, which has shut down any opposition of workers to the sell-offs, ever since they were first proposed in the 2004 Unsworth review ordered by the Carr Labor government.

The fact that the RTBU is preparing to ram through any rotten deal, as long as the government agrees to modify the NIF, was clearly expressed in a “counter-offer” given to management by the union last week that would have slashed real wages for workers. Workers must reject the conception promoted by the union that they must pay for improvements in passenger safety through the slashing of real wages.

The union deal would have seen workers receive nominal pay rises (exclusive of superannuation increases) of 2.53 percent backdated to May 2022, 3.03 percent from May 2023 and 3.03 percent from May 2024.

For the 2023 and 2024 “increases,” the RTBU includes the phrase “or the maximum remuneration increase allowed by NSW Government wages policy, whichever is greater.” This was to promote illusions that, if a Labor government is elected in the state election next March, it would abolish the existing 2.5 percent cap on annual wage rises throughout the NSW public sector.

In fact, NSW Labor leader Chris Minns, along with his colleagues in the federal government, has made clear that any increase in wages must be tied to increased “productivity,” in other words, cuts to jobs and conditions.

The inclusion of this language is significant though, as the

RTBU has previously insisted that the state wage cap does not apply to rail workers. In fact, they were the first section of workers to have the cap imposed upon them after it was first introduced by the Lemma Labor government in 2008. The union has enforced it in every enterprise agreement since, with the only difference being that increases in compulsory superannuation contributions have been additional to the cap.

Under the union proposal, workers would have received a “sign-on bonus” of \$3595.67, as partial compensation for the effective wage freeze since their last enterprise agreement expired in April 2021.

Even based on conservative inflation predictions, the union’s proposal would have seen workers lose some \$40,000 in real terms over the four years to May 2025.

Outraged workers described the union offer on social media as “weak and pathetic,” “ridiculous,” and “pretty much what management offered.” They raised that, by announcing the “paltry” proposal late on a Friday afternoon, union officials were seeking to avoid reprisal from workers, a tactic “direct from the management playbook.”

When the government rejected the union proposal and reiterated its own pay increase offer of 2.53 percent from May 2022 and 3.03 percent from May 2023, the RTBU described it as “woeful,” although it was essentially identical to the union offer. Assuming that these figures are inclusive of superannuation increases, although the union did not make this clear, it would only leave workers around \$7,200 worse off than the RTBU deal by May 2025, even if no pay rise is awarded in the first year of the next enterprise agreement.

Within yesterday’s announcement, the union provided a mechanism for the government to avoid strikes without even a suggestion of meeting workers’ demands. The RTBU stated in an email to members last night that it was prepared to call off the planned industrial action if the government agreed to provide free fares for passengers.

This follows on from “actions” called by the union in recent months, which would have seen workers turn off Opal fare collection machines. In September and October, these plans were abandoned in response to legal action from the government, which is seeking millions of dollars in lost passenger revenue from the union over earlier actions in which ticket gates were left open.

The RTBU’s promotion of the twice-aborted Opal machine stunts, which would have placed no pressure on the government to resolve workers’ issues, has served as a pretext for halting virtually all other industrial action since the beginning of September.

This delay included a new protected action ballot of the workers—who already voted overwhelmingly in favour of

strikes in January—that served no purpose other than keeping workers on the sidelines for weeks on end.

It was only in response to the anger of workers over the union’s “counter-offer” that the RTBU bureaucracy felt compelled to release its calendar of industrial action for November. As the experiences of workers throughout the dispute and especially since the beginning of September demonstrate, the union will do anything in its power to prevent workers from taking any action that presents a real challenge to the state government.

This has taken place despite the incredible hostility, not just to rail workers, but teachers, nurses and others as well, demonstrated by the NSW government this year. As Claassens reminded the media yesterday, the only occasion this year when the network was shut down was when management itself locked workers out on February 21.

What rail workers confront is not just a wage dispute, but the deepening of a decades-long attack on the public sector and the broader working class. This is not confined to NSW or the Liberal-Nationals. The federal Labor government’s first budget, announced last week, will inflict the worst cuts to workers’ living standards since World War II.

To defeat the onslaught, rail workers in NSW must link up with others in the public sector, along with broader sections of the working class, and take up a unified political struggle against the government, Labor, the industrial courts and the unions.

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.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact