

Australia: Rail union cancels industrial action against privatisation, automation

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Industrial action started on September 18 by passenger rail workers across New South Wales (NSW) was abruptly called off late last week by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU).

The cancelled measures include refusing to accept timetable changes and cancellations, as well as a ban on any work on the Bankstown line in Sydney if the section between Sydenham and Bankstown was shut down as planned.

The RTBU is posturing as an opponent of the transformation of the Bankstown line to a privately owned, driverless “Metro” service. The line is scheduled to close for 12 months, starting next Monday, for the extensive and costly conversion work.

The eleventh-hour cancellation came after the state Labor government agreed to provide free train travel to passengers over the weekend. This option was offered by the union as an easy out for the government when the action was first called, underscoring that the RTBU was never serious about going through with it.

Workers are continuing with more limited actions, including wearing union garb at work, posting union stickers and flyers, and allowing workers to speak publicly about the campaign.

The 8,000 Sydney Trains and NSW Trains employees covered by the RTBU last month voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action, including strikes of up to 24 hours. They are opposing a real-wage slashing pay rise offer from the state Labor government of 9.5 percent over three years.

The RTBU has advanced a demand for a four-year deal containing 8 percent per annum pay increases. Even taken at face value, this falls far short of what is necessary to counter the soaring cost of living and make up for previous union-brokered cuts.

But the RTBU bureaucracy, which has enforced one sell-out deal after another over more than a decade, will in any

case not lead a fight for this figure. The latest sudden and unilateral cancellation of industrial action will have a familiar and foreboding ring to rail workers who have been through a string of these betrayals.

Announcing their abandonment of the planned industrial action on Friday, the RTBU leadership told workers they had “achieved massive progress” and a “big victory,” following a meeting with the NSW transport minister, Jo Haylen.

This so-called “victory” amounts to very little. According to the RTBU, the Labor government has agreed to negotiate one enterprise agreement covering both Sydney Trains and NSW Trains.

As well, the new deal will contain an additional \$1,310.60 per annum allowance for workers who complete a “Workplace Rights Training Course provided by a union approved provider.” Mechanisms such as this are used by unions as a de facto closed shop policy, effectively imposing a levy on any worker who chooses not to join the union.

The main “victory” claimed by the RTBU leadership is a supposed commitment from the government that, “the new South-West metro will have a member on every platform monitoring the platform train interface as well as a member on every train who is qualified and competent to drive the train. This will continue forever.”

They did not specify precisely how a verbal agreement with the transport minister will be transformed into the perpetual employment of drivers on driverless trains, by a private company that has nothing to do with the current dispute.

But even if this fanciful claim is taken at face value, it amounts to the total acceptance of the privatisation and automation of the Bankstown line. The RTBU bureaucracy’s “stand” against the conversion lasted less than three days.

This is despite substantial opposition to the South-West

Metro plans. The closure of the line will mean significant inconvenience for passengers for at least the next year, with the only benefit after the work is completed possibly being slightly faster and more frequent service to the existing stations.

The RTBU bureaucracy's rapid abandonment of the pretence of mobilising workers in a fight against the Metro conversion is in line with its conduct since the plan was first announced, which has been almost entirely limited to blustering denunciations.

In March 2017, then state secretary of the RTBU Alex Claassens declared: "The RTBU is totally opposed to the removal of the existing Bankstown line to support single-deck driverless metro trains—it's an illogical change for no good reason."

In November 2018, Claassens described the conversion as "just another example of this Liberal government putting their own privatisation ideologies ahead of commuter interests."

But, with the exception of high-voltage switching bans carried out for a short time during the 2022 dispute and quickly dropped, the rail unions have never called a single strike or other industrial action directed at preventing the sell-off.

Now, with the Bankstown line conversion almost a foregone conclusion, the RTBU has done nothing more than play act, allowing the Labor government to buy its way out of industrial action for merely the price of a weekend's fares.

The fact is that the RTBU does not oppose the sell-off of mass transit—it enforces it. Over the past two decades, the union has overseen the privatisation of every mode of transportation in NSW, except heavy rail, which it is allowing to be dismantled and replaced piecemeal with the Metro.

In 2012, the RTBU facilitated the sell-off of Sydney's ferry operations to a private contractor, bragging of its "consultative" relationship with then Liberal Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian.

In 2016, the union "cautiously welcomed" the handing over of Newcastle's light rail, buses and ferries to Keolis Downer, claiming it was "a great step forward for Newcastle transport workers." In fact, within a month of the company taking over, dozens of workers were reporting underpayments of as much as hundreds of dollars per week.

These sell-offs, and the initial planning of the South-West Metro, were carried out by Liberal-National governments, and, when in opposition, Labor Party

figures have at times claimed to oppose privatisation.

In reality, NSW Labor governments, in office from 1996 to 2011, spearheaded the privatisation of state assets, including the electricity distribution network and freight train operations. The sweeping privatisation of public transport was set in motion by the Unsworth review into Sydney's bus network, commissioned in 2004 by then Labor Premier Bob Carr.

The record demonstrates that the current Labor government's support for the South-West Metro is far from an aberration. Together with the unions, Labor governments have for decades been at the forefront of the dismantling of public transport and other vital infrastructure, including health and education. They share central responsibility for the dire consequences this has had for jobs, wages and conditions, as well as public amenity.

To halt and reverse the privatisation of the rail network, and fight for real improvements to wages and conditions, rail workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be built across the rail network, as the only means through which workers can democratically develop their own demands and a plan of action through which to fight for them.

Rail workers cannot wage this struggle alone. Through rank-and-file committees, they can link up with other sections of workers, starting with the tens of thousands of nurses and other public sector workers across NSW who are also looking for a way to fight the Labor government's wage cuts.

They should also connect with building workers, whose wages, conditions and democratic rights are the target of the federal Labor government's appointment of a quasi-dictator to run the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union's construction division.

Above all, what is posed is the need for a socialist perspective and a fight for a workers' government, under which vital public services, including transport and health, along with major corporations and the banks, would be placed under democratic workers' control and operated to serve the needs of the public, rather than the profit demands of the wealthy elite.



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