

Australia: Rail union holds 5-minute “strike” as NSW Labor government seeks to cut real wages

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31 October 2024

At 3:10 a.m. on October 24, passenger rail workers across New South Wales (NSW) stopped work for five minutes, as part of ongoing enterprise bargaining with the state-owned Sydney Trains and NSW Trains.

The toothless action, cynically hailed as a “world first” by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), epitomises the role of the union bureaucracy, which is working to suppress a struggle by workers against the Labor government’s attempt to slash real wages again.

The stoppage was a slap in the face to the overwhelming majority of workers who voted in August for industrial action including strikes of up to 24 hours. It was only called at all because of a legal technicality—under Australia’s draconian anti-strike laws, any form of action voted for must be taken within 60 days, or else workers forfeit the right to take that action again.

In an October 23 letter to workers, the RTBU leadership explained that the stoppage “was supposed to be a non-event,” designed to cause minimal disruption to the network and present no challenge to the government.

According to the union, the stoppage was first planned to take place only “in select locations.” It was only expanded across the whole network after management emailed all staff, asking if they were going to take part.

The stoppage’s minuscule and pathetic character did not stop the corporate media from denouncing workers for supposedly causing delays and cancellations across Sydney’s rail network throughout the morning. This was fuelled by the state transit agency, Transport for NSW, which posted signs and electronic messages warning of delays due to industrial action.

The agency’s feigned concern for the convenience of commuters was a display of utter hypocrisy. Just weeks earlier, the T3 Bankstown line was shut down for conversion to privatised, driverless “Metro” operations.

This is expected to take at least 12 months, forcing passengers onto slow and overcrowded buses for the duration.

Last week’s token “strike” came just over a month after the RTBU abruptly shut down work bans that were ostensibly opposing the Bankstown line conversion. The union leadership never intended for the limited action to proceed, promising the Labor government that it would be called off if train travel was made free for a weekend.

This left workers only carrying out even more limited actions, including wearing union garb at work, posting union stickers and flyers, and being allowed to speak publicly about the campaign.

A raft of additional actions were started yesterday, but these still have the character of limited bans, such as on emptying rubbish bins in the rain and refusing to work in hot weather without air conditioning.

While restricting workers to these minimal measures, the RTBU bureaucracy has engaged in weeks of backroom discussions with management. Providing hardly any detail, the leadership has continually insisted that this “intensive bargaining” is producing “good outcomes.” But major issues, including pay, have not been addressed.

The state Labor government has offered rail workers a nominal pay increase of 9.5 percent over three years, in line with the punitive deals it is seeking to impose across the entire public sector.

While the official inflation rate has now dropped below 3 percent for the first time since June 2021, the price of rent, a major expense for working-class households in Sydney, continues to rise far more rapidly, with a 6.7 percent increase over the past 12 months.

The RTBU has advanced a demand for a four-year agreement with 8 percent per annum pay increases. Even

taken at face value, this would not be enough to make up for losses sustained in previous deals brokered by the union leadership.

The 8 percent figure was never intended as anything more than a distraction and an attempt to convince workers that this time would be different. In fact, the RTBU bureaucracy is treading a well-worn path—protracted ineffectual industrial bans, endless backroom negotiations and hollow strike threats, all leading to a sell-out deal that satisfies government demands for austerity.

In 2022, when rail workers were denounced as “terrorists” by the Liberal-National government’s transport minister, the RTBU fully complied with then Premier Dominic Perrottet’s demand that industrial action must not “inconvenience” passengers. The biggest disruption on the railways that year was caused by the government itself, when it shut down the whole network without warning, in response to minor industrial action.

In a year marked by mass strikes involving more than 100,000 teachers, nurses and other public-sector workers across NSW, the RTBU kept rail workers on the job. Along with every other union involved, the RTBU made sure that workers in each sector were cut off from one another, protecting the government from a struggle by the working class.

In early 2023, with inflation well above 7 percent, the RTBU rammed through a deal containing a pay “increase” of just 2.53 percent for 2022 and 3.03 percent in 2023. The bureaucracy urged workers to accept this massive cut, falsely claiming that the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC) would subsequently award a substantial pay rise through arbitration. Two months later, this amounted to a meagre 1 percent per annum above the existing deal.

There is a lengthy record of such betrayals.

In 2018, the RTBU imposed a deal containing a meagre 3 percent pay rise, in “exchange” for which workers were forced to accept job cuts and numerous attacks on their conditions. This sell-out was engineered by the bureaucracy, which, despite the overwhelming demand from workers, called only a single 24-hour strike that was designed to be outlawed by the FWC.

In 2014, the union pushed through an agreement with a nominal wage rise of just over 3 percent per annum, which committed workers to “productivity savings,” that is, cuts to jobs and conditions. Among the trade-offs was the abolition of longstanding clauses prohibiting forced redundancies and salary reductions for redeployed

workers.

This has paved the way for endless cost-cutting and is an essential part of the drive towards further privatisation and the elimination of jobs, including guards, station staff and even drivers.

As was demonstrated again in September with the hastily abandoned Bankstown line bans, any supposed opposition by the RTBU bureaucracy to the selling off of public transport has never been more than an act. Over the past two decades, the union has overseen the privatisation of every mode of transportation in NSW, except heavy rail, which it is now allowing it to be dismantled and replaced piecemeal with the Metro.

These experiences underscore that rail workers cannot advance a struggle for real improvements to wages and conditions from within the stranglehold of the RTBU bureaucracy.

Instead, independent rank-and-file committees must be built in every workplace. This is the only way for workers to take the power back from the union bureaucracy, which is tied by a thousand threads to Labor and exists to deliver the demands of the financial and corporate elite.

Through these committees, rail workers can link up with the hundreds of thousands of public sector workers across the state, who confront the same assault on wages and living conditions, and the same roadblock, the union apparatus.

Defeating this will require a political struggle against the Labor government, which, at state and federal level, is carrying out a major austerity offensive against the entire working class. This is starkly expressed in the administration of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union, which is aimed at smashing the wages, conditions and basic rights of a historically militant section of workers in preparation for a broader assault.

Above all, what is required is an alternative socialist perspective and a fight to place railways, 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.



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