

Sydney rail strike cancelled as union works with NSW Labor premier on wage-cut deal

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Late yesterday afternoon, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) called off a two-day strike by Sydney and New South Wales (NSW) passenger rail workers that was set to begin in the early hours of this morning as part of an enterprise bargaining dispute.

The union also agreed there would be no stoppage next weekend, and that another action, “a gradual reduction in kilometres able to be worked by Train Crew,” would be paused until December 9.

In a clear sign that a sell-out is being prepared behind closed doors, both the RTBU leadership and NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns have said they expect a deal to be stitched up before the end of the year.

The union praised the premier’s intervention in a letter to members last night, declaring: “The bargain was going nowhere fast, and within 24 hours, the Premier has turned it around and we’re now confident that we can achieve a good outcome.”

The union leadership claimed it had “achieved a mechanism where we can increase the percentage pay rise in the new EA [Enterprise Agreement] through identifying and abolishing waste throughout the rail agencies and within the Transport bureaucracy.”

What this boils down to is that any wage rise above the Labor government’s real-wage slashing 9.5 percent over three-year offer will have to be paid for through cuts to jobs and conditions elsewhere in the organisation.

This is completely in line with the Labor government’s policy, proclaimed well in advance of its union-backed election win last year, that pay rises must be linked to “productivity gains.”

Significantly, there was no mention in the letter of workers’ existing demand for an 8 percent per annum pay rise over four years.

This weekend’s strike was called off, not because the Labor government has agreed to give workers a real pay rise or meet any of their other demands, but because the

RTBU leadership never intended for it to proceed. For the second week running, the union leadership had given the government the option to avoid disruptive industrial action by simply running a few extra trains overnight.

The union’s threatened action was nothing more than a diversionary stunt, aimed at creating the conditions for the bureaucracy to declare victory while workers receive nothing. Nowhere in the log of claims prepared in consultation with workers is there a demand for 24-hour rail service.

Pitched to workers as a means of drumming up popular support for their cause, the bureaucracy’s linking-up of the call for 24-hour rail service with workers’ struggle for a decent pay rise in fact created widespread confusion. While the union never planned to disrupt a single train, the government and the corporate media seized the opportunity to warn passengers of mass disruption “due to industrial action.”

Now, the RTBU bureaucracy is using this entirely predictable media-government campaign to discourage workers from any further action. In a letter to members last night, the union wrote: “We know that when we cause disruption, the public takes it out on us on the frontlines.”

The cancellation is a blatant violation of the intentions of workers, who voted in August for industrial action including strikes of up to 24 hours. But this is only the latest sign that the RTBU bureaucracy is not leading workers in a fight, but preparing to sell them out.

It follows a toothless five-minute “strike” in the wee hours of October 24, which the bureaucracy cynically hailed as a “world first.”

Just over a month earlier, the union 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.

The same playbook has been used by the RTBU leadership in perpetrating previous betrayals.

In 2022, the RTBU bureaucracy sidelined workers for months while it engaged in multiple court cases, then forced them to conduct an additional protected action ballot over a plan to switch off fare collection machines. This proposed action was ultimately never carried out, serving instead as a pretext to shut down virtually all other industrial action by rail workers.

With workers cut out of their own struggle, the union leadership pushed through a sell-out deal, based on a phoney promise that larger wage rises would be delivered through the industrial courts *after* workers signed off on the rotten agreement.

In one dispute after another, the union has called off strikes before trading off hard-won conditions for minimal wage increases.

In 2008, the RTBU was the first union in NSW to agree to the 2.5 percent pay increase cap that would later cover every public-sector worker in the state. In 2014, the union allowed the deletion of redundancy and redeployment clauses, clearing the way for mass sackings. In 2018, the RTBU shut down a planned 24-hour strike and pushed through a meagre 3 percent per annum pay rise that came with cuts to jobs and conditions.

This weekend's strike cancellation and the pause on other industrial action, as well as the RTBU bureaucracy's heralding of Minns, should be a warning to rail workers that yet another betrayal is being prepared.

This means workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, must be built in every rail depot. To fight for their own interests, workers will have to wrest control of their struggle 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.

In the first instance, these committees must insist that a real industrial fight is carried out, not phoney stunts that allow the government to pick and choose when strikes proceed, without agreeing to any of workers' demands.

But rail workers cannot resolve their issues alone. Through rank-and-file committees, they will need to link up their struggle with the hundreds of thousands of public sector workers across the state, who are either in the process of fighting the Labor government's real wage cuts, or have recently had them imposed in sell-out union deals.

This includes nurses and midwives, who last week carried out their third statewide strike of the year,

demanding an immediate 15 percent pay increase and improved conditions, despite the efforts of the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association to sell them out. It also includes teachers, who have just had Labor's real wage cutting offer imposed upon them by the NSW Teachers Federation, based on a show of hands involving a tiny fraction of the workforce, who were told nothing about the deal ahead of the vote.

The notable exception to this is the state police force, who were last week awarded a 39 percent rise, in appreciation for their service as a key part of the capitalist state, tasked with enforcing the Labor government's sharpening assault on all forms of working-class opposition.

What NSW rail workers, along with the whole public sector, here and interstate, are up against is the pro-business austerity agenda of the state and federal Labor governments. Defeating this will require a political struggle, but this is impossible within the framework of the trade unions, which have presided over decades of cuts to jobs, wages and conditions, as well as the privatisation of swathes of vital public infrastructure and services.

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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