

# NSW Labor government's latest attack on rail strike highlights need for rank-and-file committees

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20 December 2024

The New South Wales (NSW) Labor government has launched a new bid to shut down industrial action by rail workers, after a Federal Court injunction halting work bans and strikes was lifted on Wednesday.

Workers voted for industrial action including strikes in August, after rejecting a real-wage-slashing pay offer from the state government. In line with the “wage cap in all but name” policy applied by Labor to the entire public sector, rail workers have been offered a meagre nominal pay increase of just 9.5 percent over three years.

The government has asked the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to suspend or terminate all action by rail workers, on the pretext that it will cause “significant economic harm,” in particular to large hoteliers and other businesses as well as threats to “public safety” on New Year’s Eve. The case will be heard on Tuesday.

This highlights that rail workers are up against a Labor government that is utterly hostile to their demand for a real pay rise and intends to use every mechanism at its disposal to eliminate their democratic rights and shut down their struggle.

They also confront a corporate media establishment that is completely on board with Labor’s attack, eagerly promoting claims that rail workers are out to ruin Christmas and New Year’s Eve in pursuit of an unrealistic and unwarranted pay increase.

Taking on such a conspiracy of forces demands a stepped-up fight, but this is impossible behind the leadership of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU). The union has only reintroduced limited measures since the injunction was lifted, and, even before the Federal Court case, was keeping action to a minimum.

To defeat Labor’s attacks and avoid a union-imposed sellout, rail workers urgently need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be built in every depot as the means through which workers can fight for demands based on their actual needs, not what the government or the union bureaucracy says is “affordable.”

To carry this out, rail workers will need to break the isolation imposed by the bureaucracy, and broaden their struggle to include the tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of other public sector workers, including nurses, midwives and other health workers, who also face deepening wage cuts at the hands of the NSW Labor government. Through an appeal based on the commonality of the struggle faced by these workers, rail workers can overcome the

filthy smear campaign being waged against them by the government and corporate media.

The NSW Labor government based its Fair Work application on the claim that rail workers’ industrial action could cause “deadly crowd crushes and anti-social behaviour,” according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH).

NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns declared Friday, “We can’t be held hostage to a situation where people are unnecessarily interrupted in the run-up to one of the most important and busy periods of the entire year.”

Minns cynically added: “We appreciate members right across the public service are finding it difficult to pay their mortgages and make ends meet, but there’s a limit to how much we can pay.”

Today, Transport Minister Jo Haylen declared that “no amount of industrial action is tolerable.”

Appearing alongside Minns, Police Commissioner Karen Webb threatened to cancel Sydney’s New Year’s Eve fireworks, due to her “grave concerns” over safety. Notably, the force Webb commands is the one part of the public sector workforce to which Minns’ “limit” seemingly does not apply. Police officers in the state were last month awarded a pay rise of up to 39.4 percent over four years, more than three times what has been offered to any other section of public sector workers.

The corporate media, with the SMH leading the way, have enthusiastically embraced Labor’s denunciations and dire proclamations, with headlines such as “Sydney’s rail network hangs in balance ahead of ultimate showdown.”

Despite the hysterical government-media propaganda campaign, the reality is that no substantive industrial action measures have actually been reintroduced by the RTBU.

In a note to members on Wednesday, titled “Huge win in Federal Court—Industrial Action to recommence immediately,” the RTBU merely invited workers to peruse “a list of all industrial action currently on foot” and decide for themselves which bans to implement.

The most significant action previously threatened, the plan to strike unless trains ran 24 hours a day on weekends, is seemingly off the table. According to the SMH, Warnes said the union promised the government five weeks ago the measure would not be enacted.

The RTBU has also not indicated if and when it will reinstate the

“reducing kilometres” action, a ban on drivers and guards working more than a set distance (declining each day) in a shift. This was the action that Warnes claimed on Monday would halve the number of trains running on New Year’s Eve.

Warnes has subsequently retracted that claim, saying he had failed to take into account that 40 percent more staff would be rostered to work on New Year’s Eve, meaning the impact of industrial action, even if it is actually introduced, would be greatly reduced.

The RTBU’s current refusal to reinstate major actions is a continuation of the approach it has taken throughout the dispute. This included an absurd 5-minute strike held at 3:10 a.m. on October 24, designed to be a “non-event,” held only to prevent the expiration of workers’ strike authorisation after the bureaucracy did not call a single stoppage for almost two months.

This was followed by the repeated cancellation of strikes, not because any of workers’ demands had been agreed to, but because the government played the union-supplied “get out of jail free card” of temporarily introducing 24-hour service from Thursday to Saturday.

Then, on November 21, the RTBU shut down the action for two weeks, supposedly as a show of “good faith” ahead of “intensive bargaining” with the Labor government, which, the union told workers, was amenable to their wage claim. The government’s real attitude was revealed when, immediately after this pause elapsed, it sought to have rail workers’ industrial action outlawed by the Federal Court.

The government failed to convince the Federal Court that a legal loophole rendered the industrial action unprotected. Because workers at Sydney Trains and NSW Trainlink are currently covered by different enterprise agreements, their strike ballots were conducted separately. But the government has since agreed to re-merge the two operations, which, it argued, meant the strike authorisation was no longer valid.

In a move designed to downplay the significance of Labor’s first legal attack against rail workers, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) held a second strike ballot last week, to resolve this technicality. This, the union said, would have allowed the industrial action to resume on December 28, even if the Federal Court had ruled in favour of the government.

Labor’s move to have the action shut down by the FWC exposes as a fraud the RTBU’s claim that the blatant attack on workers’ democratic rights could be sidestepped through such a manoeuvre.

Comments on the RTBU’s social media pages reflect growing opposition to Labor among workers, with many questioning the union’s continued funnelling of members’ dues to political donations and affiliation fees.

Reacting to this mounting sentiment, RTBU NSW secretary Toby Warnes declared yesterday that the union executive had “decided to suspend any support for the NSW Labor Party, insofar as it relates to the NSW parliamentary Labor Party.”

The precise meaning of Warnes’ reference to the “parliamentary Labor Party” is not entirely clear. What is absolutely clear, however, is that this is a highly conditional and mealy-mouthed statement that commits the union to nothing. It is effectively a vow to continue supporting the Labor Party politically and financially

throughout the rest of the country and federally.

Warnes and the RTBU are seeking to cover over the fact that the attack on workers’ rights by the NSW government is not an aberration, but the policy of the Labor Party at every level. This is most sharply expressed in the federal Labor government’s placement of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) construction division under quasi-dictatorial administration in a bid to drive down wages and conditions in the building industry.

The increasing hostility of the ruling class to any form of industrial action or protest was also on display in the FWC’s unprecedented ruling earlier this month to ban pickets by 1,500 striking Woolworths workers.

This is because the political establishment recognises that it sits atop a volcano of social opposition to Labor’s class-war agenda of deepening cuts to wages and social spending, as well as its escalation of Australia’s involvement in the war plans of US imperialism.

But this opposition will find no outlet under the control of the Labor-aligned union apparatus, the majority of which, including the RTBU, has fully endorsed government attacks on building workers’ democratic rights.

The attitude of the RTBU to the attacks on rail workers is essentially the same as its attitude to the assault on building workers. In one sell-out deal after another, the union has joined with governments and the rail bosses, to impose real pay cuts on train staff and to enforce ever more onerous conditions.

This underscores the need for rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers themselves and politically and organisationally independent of the unions and Labor.

Such committees can form the basis of the necessary political fight against the Labor government, the industrial courts, and all the other institutions of the capitalist system. This is a fight, not only for rail workers, but for the entire working class, which must defend train staff, including through the establishment of rank-and-file committees and joint strike action throughout the public sector. If Labor government ministers declare that no industrial action is permissible from rail staff, they are seeking to set a precedent that will be used against all workers. This cannot be allowed to stand.

The increasing repression, and the onslaught on workers’ conditions, coming amid a massive global crisis, shows that workers are in a fight against capitalism. The alternative is the struggle for a 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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