

# Australian rail union offers to shut down industrial action

Martin Scott

22 December 2024

Late Sunday night, the unions covering rail workers offered to abandon all substantive industrial action in their ongoing wage dispute, if the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government agreed to drop its legal case against the union and make public transport fare-free until a new enterprise agreement is approved.

This “peace offering” from the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and other associated unions would have represented the liquidation of workers’ struggle against Labor’s real-wage slashing pay “increase” proposal of 9.5 percent over three years. It violates the determination of workers to fight, expressed in two emphatic strike ballots, including one just last week.

This is a warning for rail workers that the union bureaucracy is preparing to push through a sell-out deal that will leave them falling further behind the soaring cost of living and do nothing to improve their conditions.

The Labor government refused the offer, with NSW Premier Chris Minns declaring today he was “drawing a line in the sand.” The government’s case to suspend or terminate all industrial action by rail workers will be heard tomorrow by the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

Under Australia’s draconian Fair Work Act, the FWC can order an end to industrial action on the grounds that it so much as threatens to harm the economy. The NSW government will argue specifically that rail workers’ industrial action could cause “significant economic harm,” in particular to large hoteliers and other businesses as well as threats to “public safety” on New Year’s Eve.

Continuing a media-backed campaign of blatant propaganda against rail workers, Minns said this morning, “Nothing is off the table, including—I hate to say this, but including—cancelling the fireworks or recommending that people don’t go to the city during New Year’s Eve.”

The government’s supposed safety worries are utterly bogus. In December 2019, Sydney’s fireworks proceeded amid high winds, while bushfires raged throughout the state. Every year since, the event, typically attended by more than 1 million people, has gone ahead under conditions of a global pandemic that has claimed more than 25,000 lives in Australia alone.

So too the professions of concern over the impact to public amenity. Last year, Sydney’s T3 Bankstown train line was shut down on New Year’s Eve due to planned track work. Now, the line is totally out of action for at least 12 months, as it is being converted for the driverless Metro system.

Underscoring the pro-business character of this attack, several major hospitality corporations have filed submissions in support of the government’s FWC case.

It should be noted that the substantive actions the government is complaining about have in fact not been reinstated by the rail unions since they were paused on November 21, and union officials have vowed that disruption on New Year’s Eve will be minimal.

Despite this, Labor ministers and newspaper headlines alike have blamed rail workers for hundreds of cancelled and delayed trains over the weekend.

It is entirely probable that this situation was deliberately engineered by transport authorities, which for months have plastered Sydney’s train stations with signs warning of major disruption due to industrial action. It is worth recalling that the only time in recent years that the city’s rail network has been brought to a complete halt, other than by malfunctions, was when the entire workforce was locked out on February 21, 2022, and accused by the Liberal government not only of striking, but of “terrorist-like activity.”

Workers have reported on social media that they were sent home upon arriving for their shifts over the weekend, because they were participating in the limited work bans and other protected industrial actions that are currently in place.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the RTBU said Sunday night’s offer “would enable there to be minimal disruption on New Year’s Eve and throughout the remainder of the festive season.”

In other words, the union promised to give the government exactly what it wanted—a ban on any disruptive industrial action over the Christmas-New Year period and beyond—while workers received little more in exchange than the right to keep wearing union T-shirts while the bureaucracy sells them out behind closed doors.

The conception that a temporary loss of fare revenue would pressure Labor to agree to a better pay deal is a lie—even the government’s likely inflated estimated cost of \$127 million per month is a drop in the ocean compared with the state’s annual budget of more than \$120 billion.

The RTBU leadership is promoting this illusion, as it has done in previous disputes, in an attempt to shut down workers’ demands for strikes and other substantive industrial action. Significantly, in this case, the union has offered up an olive branch under

conditions where there is substantial and growing hostility among workers to the Labor government.

The union leadership was compelled by this anger to announce on Friday that it would “suspend any support for the NSW Labor Party, insofar as it relates to the NSW parliamentary Labor Party.”

Even on its face, this statement was effectively a pledge to continue supporting the party in every other jurisdiction, under conditions where Labor governments are slashing wages and attacking workers’ democratic rights throughout the country.

But the RTBU’s attempt to paint the actions of the state government as an aberration was further exposed this morning, as Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese pledged his unequivocal support for the attack against rail workers.

Albanese said: “The Minns Government are being reasonable and we support their actions, I know it’s before the Fair Work Commission tomorrow and I hope that provides some resolution.”

The fact that the RTBU’s supposed falling-out with NSW Labor was followed just two days later by an offer to liquidate the struggle of rail workers exposes its utterly fraudulent character.

Whatever the outcome of tomorrow’s hearing, Sunday’s grovelling capitulation demonstrates that the union bureaucracy has no intention of leading a fight against this Labor government, which has launched an all-out assault on workers’ basic rights, in order to impose deepening real wage cuts.

This has been clear throughout the present dispute, in which the union has repeatedly allowed the government to avoid industrial action by temporarily providing free fares or 24-hour train service.

The RTBU’s initial claim to be fighting for an 8 percent per annum pay increase has given way to a backroom deal in November to finance wage rises by “identifying and abolishing waste throughout the rail agencies.” In other words, in line with Labor’s policy, even the tiniest improvement to the existing offer would be paid for through cuts to jobs and conditions elsewhere in the organisation.

The current operation follows a long history of sellouts by the RTBU bureaucracy.

In 2022, the union 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 wage-slashing deal, based on a phoney promise that larger pay rises would be delivered through the industrial courts after workers signed off on the rotten agreement.

In 2018, the RTBU imposed a meagre 3 percent pay rise, along with job cuts and numerous attacks on workers’ conditions. Despite the overwhelming demand from workers, the bureaucracy called just a single 24-hour strike, which was designed from the outset to be banned by the FWC.

Four years earlier, the union pushed through an agreement with a nominal wage rise of just over 3 percent per annum, along with “productivity savings,” that is, cuts to jobs and conditions. These included the abolition of longstanding clauses prohibiting forced redundancies and salary reductions for redeployed workers.

Along with this filthy record, the RTBU’s offer to shut down industrial action on Sunday night illustrates the urgent need for workers to break the shackles of the union bureaucracy and take matters into their own hands.

Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers themselves, must be built in every rail depot and workplace. Through these committees, workers can prepare demands based on their actual needs, and a plan of action to fight for them, including strikes, not mere stunts. This will likely require a fight against Australia’s repressive anti-strike laws.

Rail workers are under attack from a Labor government that is utilising every mechanism of the capitalist state, including the industrial courts, to slash their wages and shut down their fight.

This cannot be defeated from within the stranglehold of the unions, which were centrally involved, along with successive Labor governments, in drafting the harsh industrial relations laws now being levelled against rail workers. Moreover, the unions have consistently enforced these draconian measures and relied upon them to suppress workers’ struggles.

Nor can this attack be fought off by rail workers alone. Through rank-and-file committees, they can make a powerful appeal to broader sections of workers, who all confront an assault on their wages, working and living conditions at the hands of pro-business Labor governments at state and federal level.

This includes the 80,000 building workers whose workplace democratic rights have been obliterated by the federal Labor government’s administration of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union.

It also includes the hundreds of thousands of public sector workers across NSW, who all face the same wage-slashing government deal and whose struggles have been systematically sabotaged and undermined by the union bureaucrats that claim to represent them.

The entire working class must defend rail workers, including through the establishment of rank-and-file committees and joint strike action throughout the public sector. If it is allowed to stand, Labor’s attack will serve as a precedent to be used against any and all industrial action.

Above all, workers are in a struggle against capitalism. This poses the necessity of fighting for a socialist perspective and to place railways and other vital public assets, as well as the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, to be run in the interests of social need, not private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**