

Rail union liquidates industrial action by Sydney train drivers

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Early on December 24, the union covering Sydney and New South Wales (NSW) passenger railway workers shut down virtually all industrial action against the state Labor government's real-wage slashing pay "rise" offer of 9.5 percent over three years.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) bureaucracy vowed that disruptive action would not be resumed until at least January 3, guaranteeing Premier Chris Minns and his administration a trouble-free New Year's Eve.

The union backdown came less than 24 hours after the Labor government refused the bureaucracy's offer to pause action in "exchange" for fare-free travel until a new enterprise agreement is struck. The fact that the RTBU has proceeded with the liquidation anyway is a clear demonstration that the union bureaucracy is aiming to wrap up the dispute and ram through a deal that gives the Labor government everything it wants.

This confirms the *World Socialist Web Site's* warning on December 23, 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."

The government responded by dropping its Fair Work Commission (FWC) application for the industrial action to be suspended or terminated. Under Australia's draconian industrial relations laws, strikes and even the most minimal of work bans can be shut down if there is even the possibility that any of the action could cause significant economic harm. The government's claim was that industrial action by rail workers may have negatively impacted hoteliers and other businesses, especially on New Year's Eve, and also posed a risk to public safety.

The union's concession meant that, with the action already cancelled, there was no need for the case to proceed. Attempting to cover over this blindingly obvious connection, the RTBU hailed the Labor government's dropping of the case as a "win," claiming on Facebook that "the court sided with the RTBU."

This is a bald-faced lie. The union was forced to admit, in

response to critical comments from workers, "We likely would have lost, meaning we'd lose all action for a period of time." Attempting to paint its capitulation as a tactical masterstroke, the post continued, "we withdrew on a few actions to kill their case. It's how you beat these sorts of applications."

In other words, the RTBU bureaucracy is telling workers they can only advance their struggle by abandoning any planned industrial action as soon as the Labor government objects.

This was almost exactly the "strategy" adopted by the RTBU leadership in 2022, after then Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet threatened to tear up the enterprise agreement covering rail workers if they carried out any action "that inconveniences the people of New South Wales."

In total compliance with this demand, the RTBU ensured that no further substantive action went ahead, instead miring workers in multiple court battles and a second protected action ballot over a ban on fare collection that was never enacted.

After wearing workers down with almost five months without any meaningful industrial action, the RTBU bureaucracy pushed through the government's real-wage slashing deal in January, containing nominal pay rises averaging less than 3 percent per annum, at a time when the official inflation rate was at 7.8 percent.

In order to get this swindle past the opposition of workers, the union claimed that these pay "rises" were merely "minimum" figures, with a higher sum to be determined by the FWC after workers signed on the dotted line. This promise amounted to a meagre additional 1 percent per annum, far short of the soaring cost of living.

These parallels should serve as a stark warning to rail workers that the RTBU leadership is preparing to carry out yet another betrayal. The current "pause" on industrial action is only the latest example.

Since rail workers first voted to strike in July, the RTBU has largely confined their industrial action to limited work

bans, designed to cause minimal disruption on the network. The union's hostility to actual stoppages was exemplified in a five-minute "strike" at 3:10 a.m. on October 24. This farcical measure was necessary to avoid the strike authorisation lapsing, as two months had passed without the union calling a single stoppage.

The following month, the union repeatedly threatened Friday-Sunday strikes, but allowed the Labor government to avoid them by temporarily providing 24-hour train service on weekends.

This measure, and the "reducing kilometres" action were temporarily stopped on November 21 as an act of "good faith." Immediately after the pause elapsed, this was rewarded by the Labor government with a Federal Court injunction halting the actions. Despite the court ruling on December 18 that they could proceed, the union has never reinstated them.

Having initially advanced a demand for a four-year agreement with annual pay increases of 8 percent, itself inadequate to make up for previous losses, the union leadership has subsequently refrained from speaking about a concrete pay claim.

Last month, the RTBU told workers it had come to an arrangement with the Labor government to finance (unspecified) wage rises by "identifying and abolishing waste throughout the rail agencies," in other words, through cuts to jobs and conditions in other parts of the operation.

Sharp conclusions must be drawn. As long as the bureaucratic leadership of the RTBU and other "combined rail unions" are calling the shots, the trajectory for workers is one of betrayal.

This means rail workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers themselves, independently of any union, must be built in every depot and workplace. These will provide a venue for democratic discussion among workers, to prepare a list of demands based on their actual needs—not what management, the Labor government, or the union bureaucrats say is affordable—and develop a plan of action through which to fight for them.

In the first instance, rank-and-file committees must ensure that the "reducing kilometres" action is reinstated, along with other substantive measures, including strikes, this time without a get-out-of-jail free card allowing the government to dictate whether they go ahead.

What is required is not just an industrial struggle, but a political one. Rail workers are up against a Labor government that has shown it is intensely hostile to any industrial action, and is prepared to unleash the entire apparatus of the capitalist state, including the industrial courts, to suppress it.

This is not only the agenda of the NSW government, but of Labor in other states and at the federal level. The starkest example is the federal Labor government's attack on building workers, through its imposition of administration on the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union, effectively placing the union under dictatorial state control.

Significantly, this operation was carried out with the full support of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the vast majority of Australia's union bureaucracies, including the RTBU. This underscores that the necessary fight against the FWC and the repressive anti-strike laws is impossible within the framework of the unions, which collaborated with Labor to draft the legislation in 2008 and have enforced it ever since.

Also arrayed against rail workers are the corporate media, which in recent weeks have helped the government whip up a propaganda campaign, declaring that industrial action on the railways would ruin Christmas and the holiday period. This was a deliberate attempt to slander rail workers and prevent the development of a broader struggle, under conditions where workers throughout the state and the country confront an assault on their wages, working and living conditions.

Through rank-and-file committees, rail workers must make a powerful appeal to these workers, starting with the hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers across NSW who all face the same wage-slashing government deal. To defeat this, a fight must be taken up to build rank-and-file committees and a unified struggle against the Labor government throughout the public sector.

Labor's attack on rail workers' basic industrial rights—whether it is imposed by the industrial courts or by the union bureaucracy—is a direct threat to the rights of every single worker. The entire working class must be mobilised to ensure that this does not become a precedent to be repeated in one workplace after another.

The onslaught against workers' rights and conditions shows that what workers are up against is capitalism itself. This poses the necessity of fighting for an alternative, socialist, perspective and for transport and other vital public infrastructure, as well as the banks and big corporations, to be placed under democratic workers' control and ownership, and operated to meet social need, not private profit.



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