

Australia: Labor government docks pay of Sydney rail workers over limited work bans

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In the latest escalation of the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government's offensive against workers, state-owned Sydney Trains has been docking the pay of rail workers who participate in industrial action as part of a months-long enterprise bargaining dispute.

The government has presented rail workers with the same woeful pay offer made to most of the state's public sector. The nominal 9.5 percent increase over three years falls far short of meeting the ongoing real rise in the cost of living for working-class households, let alone making up for losses imposed in previous union-government deals.

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, 170 workers in the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) have had their pay partially withheld since Christmas, denying them an average of \$255 per shift. This was allegedly over their participation in a ban on working on trains or facilities cleaned by third-party contractors.

A government spokesperson told the *Daily Telegraph*, "Actions that prevent a person from doing their role will mean that pay will be docked. If you don't work, you won't be paid."

This is an open declaration from the Labor government that no industrial action will be tolerated, even that which is organised within the strictures of Australia's draconian Fair Work Act.

Withholding workers' pay is a transparent attempt to intimidate workers and pressure them into abandoning their struggle. It follows on from the media-backed propaganda campaign whipped up by the Labor government in December, including the phoney claim that industrial action by rail workers would force the cancellation of Sydney's New Year's Eve fireworks.

In a further escalation, Labor is also seeking to have the dispute shut down and forced into arbitration by the Fair Work Commission (FWC). On Friday, the government appeared before the industrial tribunal, arguing that

negotiations had reached a stalemate.

These are only the latest attempts by the Labor government to shut down this dispute and prevent rail workers from taking legally protected industrial action.

In early December, Labor argued unsuccessfully in the Federal Court that rail workers' action was unprotected due to a technicality. Even though the court ruled in favour of workers, the RTBU bureaucracy gave the government exactly what it wanted: The union has never reinstated the weekend strikes and reducing kilometre actions that prompted the court action.

Then, on December 24, the government dropped its Fair Work Commission (FWC) application for all industrial action in the dispute to be suspended or terminated, after the RTBU leadership unilaterally shut down virtually all measures that were in place.

The union bureaucracy claimed this as a "win" at the time, writing on Facebook, "we withdrew on a few actions to kill their case. It's how you beat these sorts of applications."

The subsequent actions by the Labor government expose the RTBU leadership's claim as a total fraud. The government has responded to every concession and strike cancellation of the union by redoubling its offensive against the right of workers to oppose attacks on their pay and conditions.

While the corporate media is already reprising its denunciations of rail workers ahead of new work bans set to begin tomorrow, most of these are of a limited character. The most substantive new actions—speed reductions on the few sections of track where trains travel at more than 80 kilometres per hour, and a ban on late changes to train schedules or stopping patterns—are only slated to be in place for three days.

RTBU NSW secretary Toby Warnes told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) last week the union was doing "everything we can to try to minimise... disruption"

on the rail network.

The RTBU announced this morning it had filed a case in the Federal Court seeking compensation for workers whose pay was withheld due to their involvement in limited work bans. This will keep workers tied up in a drawn-out legal process, during which the threat of wage docking still hangs over workers' heads as a pressure to back down from industrial action and accept a sell-out deal.

With the Labor government using every measure at its disposal to try to crush workers' opposition, the union bureaucracy continues to promote illusions that decent pay and conditions can be achieved through legal manoeuvres and backroom negotiations.

Last week, Unions NSW, the peak body representing unions in the state, sought to blame the Labor government's refusal to offer rail workers a real pay rise on the "inability to navigate complex negotiations effectively" of the individual Sydney Trains negotiators involved in bargaining.

Warnes echoed this fraudulent claim, calling for Transport for NSW coordinator general Howard Collins to come to the negotiating table. Warnes claimed "Howard Collins is a seasoned rail man and has the ability to suck all the heat out of a room to let people see eye to eye."

This is a blatant attempt to pull the wool over workers' eyes. As former head of Sydney Trains and in his current role, Collins has presided over more than a decade of cuts to the jobs, wages and conditions of rail and other transport workers.

More significantly, what the RTBU bureaucracy is seeking to cover up is that whatever the individual identity of the bargaining representatives, the wage policy they are enforcing is that of the state Labor government.

A government spokesperson told the ABC last week, "we can't say yes to the rail unions while at the same time say no to the nurses' union and other unions who reached reasonable settlements over the course of 2024."

In other words, the NSW Labor government is unwavering in its hostility to a real pay rise for workers in any part of the public sector, and is counting on the RTBU, along with the other public sector unions, to impose its miserly offer.

Warnes told the ABC the union bureaucracy was ready to oblige, saying, "We're absolutely willing to negotiate but we need somebody on the other side of the table."

In November, 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, any pay increase, even one far short of workers' 8 percent per annum demand, will be paid for through cuts to jobs and conditions in other parts of the operation.

The RTBU bureaucracy's abandonment of workers' demands, and its repeated strike cancellations to show "good faith" to a Labor government that is intensely hostile to workers, show clearly that the union is preparing to sell workers out.

To prevent this, rail workers need to take matters out of the hands of the betraying trade union bureaucrats and into their own. Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers themselves must be built in every depot and workplace to lead a fight for real improvements to wages and conditions.

Rail workers are up against a Labor government that is prepared to unleash the entire apparatus of the capitalist state, including the industrial courts, to suppress their struggle.

But they are not alone. The entire public sector, in NSW and throughout the country, face ongoing real wage cuts imposed by Labor governments at state and federal level, and enforced by the trade unions. More broadly, the entire working class confronts a deepening assault on living standards overseen by Labor, through real wage cuts, interest rate rises and the slashing of social spending.

Through rank-and-file committees, rail workers must make a powerful appeal to these workers. To defeat the attack on jobs, wages, conditions and democratic rights, a fight must be taken up to build rank-and-file committees and a unified struggle against the Labor government throughout the working class.

Above all, what is required is a fight for a socialist perspective, in which transport and other vital public infrastructure, as well as the banks and big corporations, are placed under democratic workers' control and ownership, and operated to meet social need, not private profit.



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