

Australian unions shut down industrial action by Sydney rail workers, propose sell-out “counter offer”

Martin Scott
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The unions covering rail workers in Sydney and its surrounds have shut down all substantive industrial action after the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government launched its second bid to have the Fair Work Commission (FWC) terminate the action officially.

Under Section 424 of Australia’s anti-strike Fair Work Act, the FWC can shut down all industrial action in a dispute if there is a chance that the action may cause “significant harm” to the economy. If the FWC orders a permanent “termination,” rather than a temporary “suspension,” enterprise bargaining ends, and the pro-business industrial tribunal imposes a deal upon workers through arbitration.

What played out on Wednesday was an almost scene-for-scene replay of December 24, right down to the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) bureaucracy absurdly claiming “victory” when their strike liquidation promise led the government to drop its case.

The only notable difference this time around is of magnitude. Whereas the Christmas Eve undertaking was time-limited, the RTBU is now vowing to maintain an indefinite halt on disruptive action until a deal is struck. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which also covers some workers involved in the dispute, has dropped its partial work bans until at least February 4.

In a letter to members on Tuesday, the RTBU leadership claimed “the importance of beating the 424 application cannot be understated.” This is a total fraud! Nothing has been beaten! The union bureaucracy has given the Labor government exactly what it wanted—a guarantee of industrial peace—and workers have received nothing in exchange.

The RTBU leadership notes, “at every turn from now until the end of the bargain, the Government will try to launch some form of legal action against us to stop us.” In

other words, workers can do nothing except stand aside and wait for a sell-out backroom agreement to be cooked up between the union bureaucracy and the Labor government.

This prognosis is spelled out in black and white in the letter’s concluding words, “the only way out of this mess for the Government is to negotiate with your EA [enterprise agreement] delegates.”

Despite the RTBU’s repeated complaints that the government is refusing to “come to the table,” the behind-closed-doors wheeling and dealing is well underway.

On Monday, the rail unions claimed they were “extremely close on wages” after presenting the government with a “counter offer.” According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, this was for a nominal pay rise of 4 percent in the first year and 3.5 percent in each of the second and third, barely higher than Labor’s original offer of 9.5 percent over three years.

The offer was rejected by the Labor government, which reportedly refused to withdraw proposed changes to the current agreement, including the stripping back or removal of clauses relating to union consultation and the introduction of new technology.

The RTBU bureaucracy now denies the miserly pay figures, claiming “the counteroffer was misreported” and was in fact for pay increases of 9 percent (including back pay to May 1, 2024) in the first year, and 5.5 percent per annum in years two and three.

The unclarity around the counter offer poses important questions. Why did the union wait more than 24 hours, until after the government had rejected the proposal, to “reveal” that the media reports were completely wrong? RTBU NSW secretary Toby Warnes told the *Herald* on Tuesday morning he was “disappointed” the offer had been leaked, but made no attempt to correct the reports.

On Facebook, in response to questions about the counter offer arising from the news, the union merely instructed workers to “contact your EA delegate for more info.”

Why the secrecy? The government, Transport for NSW and the FWC all knew the truth—they had the offer in front of them. The only people the union was keeping in the dark were the workers. The only conceivable purpose was to prevent an outpouring of opposition from workers over the attempted sell-out, until the government had made its decision. Only once the deal could be presented as a fait accompli, did the bureaucracy intend to reveal the details.

Even assuming that what the union says now about the offer is true, it demonstrates that the bureaucracy is gearing up to push through a deal that falls far short of the 8 percent per annum over four years demand put forward when workers voted overwhelmingly for industrial action in August. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, even this initial demand was woefully inadequate to make up for the soaring cost of living and previous losses imposed through repeated union sellouts.

The truth is that the RTBU was never going to allow workers to undertake a serious fight for their demands. The unions’ leadership of the whole dispute has been characterised by a succession of stunts, public relations exercises, toothless work bans and one retreat after another, fraudulently claiming each as a minor victory.

Every concession—whether in the name of “good faith” or supposedly shrewd tactics—by the union bureaucracy to Labor’s demands that workers’ action be shut down has further emboldened the government’s attack on workers. Where Labor previously declared that disruption on the railways during the Christmas-New Year period was unacceptable, now the government has made clear that any form of industrial action, at any time, will not be tolerated. At least 170 workers who took part in limited, legally “protected” work bans have had their pay docked, in an act the government has vowed to repeat in the event of further action.

In its latest letter to members, RTBU bureaucracy said the NSW Labor government “has gone rogue.” This is the union’s latest blatant attempt to cover over the fact that the attack on NSW rail workers is part of a broader assault on workers’ pay, conditions and democratic rights being perpetrated by Labor governments throughout the country and at the federal level.

The anger among rail workers and growing sections of the working class to the openly hostile Labor government compelled the RTBU to declare in December that it had “decided to suspend any support for the NSW Labor

Party, insofar as it relates to the NSW parliamentary Labor Party.”

This was effectively a vow to continue supporting Labor politically and financially throughout the rest of the country and federally, and a smokescreen to cover up the integral role of the RTBU and the rest of the union apparatus in the party and every one of its governments.

The latest strike cancellation and “counter offer” by the union bureaucracy should be a stark warning to workers that a sell-out deal is just around the corner.

To prevent this, rail workers need to take matters into their own hands. 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 intransigently hostile to the demands of workers for real pay rises and improved conditions, and which is ready to mobilise the entire apparatus of the capitalist state, including the industrial courts, to crush their struggles.

This is the situation confronting the entire public sector, in NSW and throughout the country, who face ongoing cuts to real wages and conditions at the hands of Labor governments and enforced by the trade unions.

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 throughout the working class and a unified struggle against the Labor government and the capitalist profit system itself.

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, to serve the needs of the entire working class, not deliver ever-growing profits to the financial and corporate elite.



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