

Unions impose sellout deal on Australian rail workers

By Oscar Grenfell
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Despite mass opposition from their members, the Combined Rail Unions, headed by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), have imposed another regressive enterprise agreement (EA) covering more than 9,000 train workers in Sydney and across the Australian state of New South Wales.

The deal, drawn up in backroom negotiations between the unions and rail management, acting on behalf of the state Liberal-National government, will intensify the assault on jobs, wages and conditions and accelerate moves toward privatisation.

Voting figures released on Saturday by the RTBU indicate strong opposition to the agreement. According to the union, of the 6,525 Sydney Trains staff who cast a ballot, just 52.8 percent voted “yes.” Of the 1,379 NSW Trains employees who voted, only 50.8 percent ratified the deal.

According to union figures, more than 3,000 workers across the state may have boycotted the ballot. The result shows that any claims by the unions, or rail management, that they have secured a mandate for the cost-cutting measures contained in the agreement, are a sham.

Before the postal voting concluded on March 23, workers expressed concerns to WSWS reporters over the transparency of the ballot. Assuming that the figures announced by the unions are accurate, the unions could only secure a razor-thin margin through a months-long campaign to suppress opposition among rail workers.

The unions did everything they could to prevent a January 29 rail strike, overwhelmingly endorsed by workers. The RTBU organised a sham text message ballot, based on a one-page summary of an EA “offer,” in a bid to shut-down the strike just two days before it was scheduled to proceed.

After workers rejected the union “ballot,” the Fair Work Commission intervened, banning the stoppage and all industrial action for six weeks. The RTBU enforced

the ban, declaring it would “always abide” by the rulings of the pro-business industrial tribunal.

Amid criticism of the deal, the RTBU then shut down comments on its official Facebook page, and refused to call any mass meetings, in a desperate attempt to prevent any discussion among rail workers. At the same time, the unions continued to hold closed-door negotiations with government and management representatives, about which workers were told nothing.

Throughout March, the unions sought to bulldoze workers into ratifying the deal. The RTBU, fearful of the intense hostility to its sordid manoeuvres, cynically claimed it was not advocating a “yes” or “no” vote.

Yet RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens previously had said the union was “very close on all the conditions” to formally recommending the deal. The union played a central role in drafting the sellout, and its officials attended management-organised depot meetings throughout February, aimed at pressuring workers to accept it.

The RTBU issued membership bulletins warning that a “no” vote would result in the continuation of an effective wage freeze imposed since the expiry of the previous agreement last year.

Other Combined Rail Unions officials explicitly backed the agreement. Dave McKinley, NSW secretary of the Electrical Trades Union, issued a statement on March 8 declaring the deal was “outstanding” and the “best outcome that could be obtained.”

Claassens, speaking to the media on Saturday after the result was announced, stated: “We’ve been able to improve on a lot of our working conditions, which is what we always said was the issue.”

These claims are a lie. The new agreement provides for endless pro-business restructuring, widespread sackings and the further erosion of working conditions.

A 3 percent annual pay rise, touted by the unions as a

“victory,” is well below real increases to the cost of living. At the same time, the state government said the 0.5 percent increase over its 2.5 percent public sector wage cap, would be paid for through “productivity savings,” including job cuts.

The deal provides for a crackdown on sick leave, and expanded disciplinary measures, including, in some cases, forcing workers onto leave without pay. It mandates the creation of a single “Rail Operations Centre,” meaning the closure of existing facilities, and further retrenchments.

The agreement facilitates the use and expansion of contract and casual labour throughout the NSW train network. It also allows for forced redundancies.

The agreement signals that management intends to work closely with the unions to enforce sweeping cost-cutting. It includes clauses facilitating “changes to the terms” of virtually every aspect of the agreement, in union-management arbitration, supposedly to be followed by ballots of workers.

The entire agreement is predicated on a further onslaught against the jobs and conditions of rail workers, which will exacerbate the already dire situation they face, including enforced overtime, unrelenting shifts and chronic understaffing.

The deal will facilitate protracted moves by successive state Labor and Liberal-National governments toward privatisation. These are being accelerated by the introduction of a privately-owned and publicly-subsidised “Sydney Metro” network, that supposedly will operate alongside the state-owned train system, beginning in 2019. Significantly, the new network will feature driverless trains.

The unions are well aware that the pro-business agenda outlined in the agreement will provoke major struggles among rail workers and other public transport staff. Claassens acknowledged this on Saturday, stating: “The fact that it only just scraped across the line means that the workforce is still very unhappy with everything that’s gone on.”

The RTBU and its affiliates will respond to any movement among workers with intimidation, victimisations and bullying. The union issued a statement on Saturday that contemptuously told workers: “As the agreement has been voted up, all industrial action needs to now stop now.” Workers had worn union badges and paraphernalia opposing the government cuts.

The critical issue facing rail workers is to draw the political lessons of the experiences through which they

have passed. Every union-brokered agreement has resulted in stepped-up cuts, mass sackings and the erosion of conditions, including the 2008, 2011, and 2014 deals.

The record makes clear that workers entering into struggle confront the necessity of a rebellion against the trade unions, which function as an industrial police force of management, the ruling capitalist class and the government of the day, whether Labor or Liberal-National.

Workers need to prepare in advance for the struggles that will erupt as the EA is implemented. New organisations, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required to launch a fightback against the union-endorsed cuts in the enterprise agreement. Such committees would be tasked with breaking the isolation imposed by the unions, including by coordinating joint industrial and political action among rail workers around the country, and with other public transport workers in struggle against privatisation and endless cost-cutting.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective, which rejects the subordination of transport, and every social right, to the profit dictates of a tiny corporate and financial elite. That means the fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing transport, along with the banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

We urge workers looking for the means to fight the union’s sell-out to contact the Socialist Equality Party.

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