

NSW GOVERNMENT SLASHES STATION ASSISTANT JOBS

RAIL WORKERS FACE FORK IN THE TRACKS

SWITCH TO STRIKE ACTION TO SAVE JOBS AND SERVICES

11 February 2010: It is high time for the union representing rail workers to switch course. At the moment the Rail, Bus and Tram Union (RBTU) is only meekly protesting while RailCorp has cut over 30% of station workers' jobs. But the RBTU has the power to reverse this. A big chunk of Sydney's industry and commerce depends on the labour of employees who use public transport to get to work. A solid strike by public transport workers could bring the big business bosses to their knees and force them to get their henchmen in state parliament to back off. However, if such action is not organized soon rail workers will be stuck on a track taking them down a dark tunnel of still deeper job losses.

Right now RailCorp is doing just about everything to make work unbearable for CityRail's customer service staff. They are transferring these workers to other roles for which they have no training while cutting the paid work hours of those remaining. Those that the bosses manage to thereby hound out are then not replaced - and neither are retirees. So no jobs for the next generation! Now, RailCorp executives are reportedly planning forced redundancies.

All these cuts are hurting public transport users too. Platforms are left unattended for longer periods of the day thus increasing the risk of accidents. The disabled and aged have to increasingly rely on luck if they need assistance. And with station staff around for less hours of the day, Indian students and other "ethnic" people facing racist assaults, as well as women, are ever more vulnerable to night time attacks around stations. Meanwhile, you wouldn't want to ever need to use a platform toilet at the wrong time of day - it may well be locked because there are no staff around!

Station assistants are furious that while all this is happening, RailCorp brochures are bragging about how they are improving service! You might think that the NSW government that owns RailCorp would refrain from undermining service quality in order to avoid annoying voters. Yet, whether it's the present bunch of ALP hacks or the openly anti-working class Coalition, whichever government runs this system answers ultimately not to the voters but to the big end of town that really calls the shots. Thus, while ALP leaders might wish that they could soothe their working class base by improving social services, they are actually not prepared to carry out the required taxation of the property developers, bankers and other billionaires which is essential to provide the money for rebuilding public transport and public hospitals.



December 2009: Postal workers at a picket line. Tens of thousands of Australia Post workers held a series of strikes in the lead up to Christmas.

To the extent that the government does plan to expand services it is to be financed, paradoxically enough, by slashing jobs and quality. Often this is done through privatization which enables governments to pass the "responsibility" for cuts onto private operators. RailCorp has already started privatising by contracting out jobs like cleaning and station maintenance. This has been a dirty affair with some RailCorp executives handing out the contracts to their private sector mates at inflated prices. The government then shamelessly seizes on the resulting losses to declare that further contracting out is needed ... in order to improve "efficiency"! Most cynically, Premier Keneally is claiming that the only way the government can finance rail network expansion is by carrying out its unpopular plan to sell-off electricity generation. We say: Don't fall for such divide and rule tactics! Stop electricity privatization - Smash all contracting out of rail services! Demand that the long overdue expansion of the rail network be financed by grabbing a chunk of the wealth of filthy rich tycoons - wealth that is after all derived from the exploitation of their workers!

To see what is possible when the key industry, banks and infrastructure are publicly owned, just look at what is being achieved by China's railways. Despite a harmful level of capitalism having been allowed to intrude, China's socialistic public sector remains the dominant force in her economy. As a result, China was able to last year alone build over 5,000 kilometres of new rail lines! This includes high-speed lines that are now carrying the world's fastest intercity trains - with average speeds of 350 km/hour being travelled on these trains built by state-owned companies. In the meantime, China has increased subsidies to suburban operations to allow ticket prices to be slashed. As a result you can

go from one end of Beijing to the other by train for the equivalent of just 34 Australian cents. But just the opposite is happening here!

A RAIL WORKERS STRIKE WOULD WIN MUCH SUPPORT

NSW governments of either stripe may be prepared to allow rail services to deteriorate but much of the public definitely have other ideas. A rail strike to win back jobs and services would thus win broad support. Working-class sections of the rail-using community would in particular be sympathetic because they both value public transport and understand from their own experience the need to stand up to greedy bosses. Many CFMEU building workers whose union comrades are being persecuted by extreme anti-union laws would be glad to support fellow unionists taking a stand. So would other proud unionists.

That is why if the RBTU called a rail strike it could mobilise masses of people to join strikers in picket line rallies outside key stations and depots. This is vital not only to stop scabbing but to undermine the inevitable efforts of the big business-owned media to portray the strike as “unpopular.” To help build such strike-support rallies the union should raise slogans for expanded services. A call for every station platform to be staffed by at least two station assistants during all hours of operation would be very popular – especially amongst shift workers, pensioners and victimised ethnic minorities. The union should also call for more station assistants instead of Rail Security – Rail Security are disliked for bullying poor people and youth while providing no real service. Furthermore, the RBTU must demand a drastic cut in ticket prices so that the poor will not be priced out of access to transport. Public transport is a right - it should not “pay for itself” but should be heavily subsidized. That is the set up they have in China – and we want that here too!

Of course, the starting point for building action to defend jobs and services is within the RBTU itself. As a minimum any strike to smash attacks on customer service workers should be a shutdown of the whole rail network – including drivers, booking staff and maintenance workers. This will not be hard to build as all rail workers are facing attacks. Secondly, rail workers must reach out to their fellow RBTU members in the buses to build joint industrial action. Bus drivers are also itching to fight back. On December 18 bus drivers struck over the government’s insistence that they trade off conditions and accept casualisation of full-time jobs in order to get a pay rise. If rail and bus workers struck together it could really teach the rich ruling class that they had better not mess with public transport workers!

Yet RBTU leaders have done nothing to organize a rail strike. This has sadly but predictably led to workers becoming demoralized. Customer service employees report that the gloomy mood has even led to outbreaks of petty bickering amongst workers. Furthermore, some rail workers disgusted with the RBTU tops’ do-nothing stance have quit the union.

Who needs privatisation!



The world’s fastest train service the newly opened Wuhan to Guangzhou express is operated by state-owned China Railways using trains designed and built by state-owned Chinese manufacturer CNR -Tangshan Railway Vehicle Co. The average speed of the journey is 350 km/h.

Their anger is understandable but leaving the union is a very bad move. It only weakens the fighting potential of workers. What’s more it only makes it easier for the sell outs to justify their stance. After all, the argument that union bureaucrats always raise for a do-nothing stance is that workers are not powerful or organised enough to triumph in an industrial campaign. Politically aware workers should therefore channel the anger of workers into agitation for a strike and should re-recruit workers into the union to make the needed industrial action more powerful. There is indeed nothing like a solid strike to unite workers together and raise their spirits.

But how to get to such a strike? Firstly, those workers who want to motivate an industrial campaign should talk among themselves and hone down their arguments. Then, together they should motivate a strike program amongst their

fellow workers. When ready, large delegations of workers should show up at the union offices and with fingers pointing should demand that the RBTU officials do their job and call an all-out rail strike to reverse job cuts.

Once a strike is called it’s on for young and old. Such a struggle poses the need for a union leadership that is prepared to not only stand up to threats from RailCorp and the state government but to stand in defiance of federal anti-strike laws, anti-strike injunctions by the industrial courts, police attacks on picket lines and anti-union sentiment whipped up by rightwing talkback hosts. However, it is not in the make up of the current, pro-ALP RBTU leaders to do this. They have become all too comfortable sitting in negotiating rooms with the bosses or looking in vain for justice from the courts. Like the present ACTU heads, the current RBTU tops think that the way to get a better deal for workers is to elect a sympathetic government to run the system, which to them means the ALP.

Yet for the last 15 years, the NSW ALP government has been attacking social services the same way the Liberals would, while in Canberra, Rudd and Gillard have retained large chunks of Howard's hated *Workchoices*. The point is that no matter who is elected to administer the current system they are only overseeing a bureaucracy, judiciary and police force that have been created to serve the rich capitalist elite while running the very economic order that is controlled by this same capitalist class. Only when the working class gains the strength needed to create its own state, only then, can we rely on governments to serve the masses. We badly need union leadership that understands all this. That understands that until a workers state is built - and indeed in order to prepare workers for this future task – **the working class must rely on its own power to defend its rights**. RBTU activists must lay the groundwork for such a leadership by convincing fellow workers that if they choose to flex their industrial muscle and feel their own power and unity, workers will be in a better position to defend their conditions no matter which servant of the upper class gets elected at the upcoming state election. **Build an unlimited rail strike to win back lost jobs and protect services!**