

Opinion: Free travel thanks to rail workers. But what's the real cost?

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Alex Claassens, RTBU Secretary: Commuters are currently getting 12 free days of travel after rail workers forced the NSW Government to provide some sort of compensation for its outrageous rail shut down in February.

The NSW Government is trying to suggest that it is giving the free travel as a way of stimulating the economy and helping families – completely ignoring that fact that it is only doing it because it was forced to by rail workers.

When the NSW Government shut down the rail network on February 21, it left commuters throughout the state stranded and workers ready to start their shifts confused. After initially trying to blame workers and publicly abusing the workforce, even likening them to terrorists, the government finally conceded the shutdown was a plan at least two weeks in the making and agreed that it would look at compensating commuters with free travel.

When, after many weeks, the free travel was still not forthcoming, rail workers forced the government's hand by threatening to take industrial action until the government delivered.

Free travel is fantastic and there's no doubt commuters deserve it - that's why rail workers fought so hard to force the government to deliver it – but the reality is it's a short term sweetener that the NSW Government is hoping distracts from the bigger issue at hand, which is the government's complete failure to manage public transport in this state.

The rail shut down was just one failure, albeit a significant and very public one, among a long list of

transport failures.

Bus privatisation has resulted in poorer services and inequity in pay and conditions for workers; billions has been wasted on overseas built trains, ferries and trams that are unsafe and don't suit our needs – the list is long and disturbing.

Perhaps some of the bumbles can be put down to incompetence, but rail workers are very concerned there is also something more sinister at play too.

The reason behind this latest mess is the NSW Government's continued refusal to agree to some very basic asks as part of enterprise agreement negotiations. They include things like ensuring any change made to the system makes it as safe or safer as it was before and committing to maintaining the high level of hygiene on our transport introduced during covid.

These are hardly controversial asks, but the government seems steadfast in its refusal to agree to many of them. What's also concerning is that the government has refused to rule out ripping up the entire enterprise agreement that Sydney and NSW Trains workers have fought hard to have in place for many years. Doing that would be a complete disaster for safety, not to mention for the working conditions of our transport workers.

The NSW Government has made no secret of its plans to automate and privatise our transport, but it also knows this will make transport more expensive, less safe, less convenient, and less reliable for voters. So, it keeps everything hidden, barring unions from transport risk assessments and slapping public servants with Non-Disclosure Agreements.

The rail shut down was another classic example of that. Despite numerous demands, the so-called 'risk assessment' used to justify the rail shutdown has never seen the light of day, and the public attack on workers seemed designed to distract from the real issues at hand.

So while the short-term free transport is fantastic, the longer-term outlook for transport is nowhere near as glossy.

Commuters should enjoy the Easter gift of free transport that our rail workers have delivered, but when the sugar hit wears off, let's remember that a safe, accessible and affordable public transport system is the real gift the NSW Government should be giving us.