

Australia: Transport union collaborates in destruction of tram jobs

The Socialist Equality Party
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With the help of the Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union (RTBIU), Yarra Trams sacked more than 100 tram drivers and other staff this week, including 14 drivers at Brunswick depot, 15 at Glenhuntly, 18 at Essendon, 12 at Malvern, 4 at Kew, 3 at Camberwell, 6 at Preston and 6 at Southbank. Fifteen ticket inspectors, three tram attendants and a number of administrative staff were axed as well. The move is part of a \$2.3 billion re-privatisation of Melbourne's train and tram networks being carried out by the Bracks Labor government in the state of Victoria.

Three days before management called in the workers to be sacked, union officials held an executive meeting with delegates where a management representative informed them how the job cuts would be implemented. Workers were not to be warned, but were to be summoned in groups and confronted with "counsellors" and security staff—to ensure they left the premises. Union delegates were to leave them to their fate. Not one shop steward opposed the plans or even raised a question.

In fact, the sacked workers were selected with the union's cooperation. They included workers on light duties following workplace injuries, others who had taken sick leave and some who were not financial members of the union at the time.

Behind workers' backs, the Labor government and the RTBIU have been preparing for over a year to destroy tramway jobs and conditions as an inducement to private operators. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in February 2003: "Another round of downsizing and attacks on working conditions is being prepared in order to cut costs and to attract a new private investor."

The operation is a continuation of the union's track record in shackling the workforce to the privatisation of

the tramways and railways, which commenced under the previous Kennett Liberal government. The initial tramways privatisation failed, despite huge government subsidies, and the private operator National Express walked out in December 2002. The union subsequently committed itself to assisting the Bracks government to re-privatise the network.

In January this year, the union signed an enterprise agreement to work in "a spirit of co-operation and industrial harmony to ensure the success of an orderly" handover. The deal permitted Yarra Trams to retrench workers "determined as surplus to Organisational establishment".

The agreement said the merger of two tram companies would create "synergies" that would make some workers "excess to the requirements of the Organisational and operation structures for the merged business". Selections for dismissal would be determined by whether an employee could "satisfactory (sic) perform all functions of the position". Arrangements were made for the union to participate in discussions to organise the sackings.

Further sackings and attacks on the conditions of the remaining workers are certain to follow. The enterprise agreement allows for continuing redundancies, forced transfers, changes to job tenure and extension of working hours whenever the company dictates, as long as the union is informed.

Yarra Trams CEO Herbert Guyot extended his praise to the unions last month. "I would like to acknowledge the work of the unions who have shared our vision for Melbourne," he said. RTBIU tram division secretary Lou di Gregorio reciprocated. "My members will co-operate with Yarra to make Melbourne's tram system the world's best," he told the media.

The new private operators will receive massive

government subsidies. According to leaked information from a closely-guarded 1,000-page contract between the government and the companies, Connex and Yarra Trams will be paid a total of \$2.3 billion during five year franchises from April 18 to operate the train and tram networks respectively.

This handout includes an extra \$1 billion on top of payments specified in prior franchise agreements. Altogether, Connex will receive \$345 million a year, an increase of \$165 million, and Yarra Trams will be paid \$112 million annually, an increase of \$26 million.

Under both Liberal and Labor governments, the companies were released from obligations for infrastructure improvements required under their franchises. One of the few released details of the new contract is that Connex will no longer be required to redevelop Flinders Street Station, the main hub for the metropolitan rail network.

It has also been revealed that the Labor government has honoured hidden commitments under the previous privatisation contracts. In his 2003 financial statement, the state auditor-general noted that the government had assumed a \$350 million debt incurred by the National Express special purpose financing vehicle (SPV) companies that were set up to buy rolling stock.

The cold-blooded manner in which the RTBIU has enforced this week's sackings makes clear that the unions have become nothing but instruments for policing the attacks of employers and governments.

One sacked worker told the WSWS: "I was called into the manager's office along with other workers and we were handed notices stating that we no longer had a job with the new company. At this time, a number of counsellors walked into the room. I asked them, 'Are you going to give me a job?' They said 'No'.

"I said that I had nothing to say to them and walked out to see the [union] delegate, who remained working during the entire time that we were being sacked. He merely told me to put in a letter to the manager to appeal being sacked.

"During 14 years of working in the trams I have had an excellent driving record. The letter gave no reason for sacking me; it merely stated I would continue to be paid as an employee until April 18 and offered financial and psychological assistance.

"I feel that the union has lied to the workers. It was previously stated in meetings that no financial members

would be sacked. I think that management and the union both had a list of the ones who they wanted to go, and came to an agreement on the final people.

"One of the workers who was sacked, a quiet Asian man who was here for nearly 20 years, was sacked because he owed the union about \$1,000 in back dues.

"I have received about 60 calls from workers since I was sacked and many of them want to go on strike against what has happened."

In an attempt to prevent any unified struggle by tram and train workers, the union is now launching a campaign of insinuations and slander against the sacked workers who had been injured on the job or who had been ill.

The outright collaboration of the RTBIU in the Yarra Trams restructure and sackings demonstrates, yet again, that the trade unions no longer in any way represent the interests of workers. As far as defending the basic rights of their members, they have completely disintegrated. It is critical that workers draw the necessary political conclusions and begin to organise new forms of struggle, completely independent from, and in conscious opposition to, the unions and the Labor Party.

A political campaign throughout the working class against the sackings, cutbacks and government subsidies to the private transport companies would expose how public transport and all other essential services are being sacrificed to the drive for corporate profit. It would help demonstrate the necessity for an alternative perspective in the working class, based on replacing the present system of private ownership and profit with a socialist system of public ownership and democratic control of the economy. Only in this way will social priorities be oriented to meeting the needs of the vast majority, rather than the personal fortunes of a privileged few. This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party.



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