

Australia: Critical lessons from the tramway sackings in Melbourne

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Tramway workers, along with their counterparts throughout the entire public transport system, must draw the sharpest lessons from the sackings of more than 100 tram drivers and other staff from eight depots last month. Rather than being the end of a process, the job cuts mark the beginning of a renewed assault on public transport workers as the state Labor government begins the \$2.3 billion process of reprivatising part of Melbourne's train and tram networks.

The immediate beneficiaries are the new owners, the private consortium Yarra Trams. The initial public transport privatisation failed despite huge government handouts when the previous operator National Express walked away in December 2002.

The job cuts were only possible because of the open collaboration of the Rail Tram and Bus Industry Union (RTBIU) with the government and Yarra Trams. Union officials actually helped to select, and then isolate, the victims. Now, within weeks of the sackings, the RTBIU is moving to implement a series of attacks on working conditions, including roster changes and forced transfers. The roster changes will see drivers' weekly working hours increase from 40 hours to 41.5 and allow a 2 percent pay increase. The forced transfers will immediately affect 17 workers from the Malvern depot, who will be shifted to Brunswick.

In the past, tram drivers could not be transferred forcibly. But the enterprise work agreement signed off by the union with Yarra Trams in early 2003 overrides the old provisions, allowing the company to simply give workers 14 days' notice. Other conditions in the 2003 agreement, such as severe restrictions on workers taking holiday leave and rostered days off at their own convenience, will now apply to all the former M>Tram depots taken over by Yarra Trams.

Union secretary Lou Di Gregorio and other RTBIU officials have been touring the depots to soften up their members to accept the new conditions. Such is the hostility among workers, however, that the Malvern, Brunswick and Glenhuntly depots have rejected the roster changes, while Malvern has voted down the transfers. While this overwhelming rejection is important, workers should be under no illusion that it will alter

the union's direction. The RTBIU will work to wear down opposition and call new meetings to push through whatever management requires.

Its tactics have been developed over decades. To keep tram workers divided, the RTBIU calls separate depot meetings. The agenda is then tightly controlled to limit discussion. No formal discussion has been held, for example, at any of the depots on the April sackings or the fate of the workers who were dismissed. In this way, the union works to create a climate of intimidation and ensure that no movement develops against the sackings.

In a letter to the *World Socialist Web Site* on May 8, a tram worker at the Glenhuntly depot, from which 15 workers were sacked, explained: "At our depot, we work in fear. We pay our union dues solely so we can work, and even then we don't know who is worse—management who pays us, or the union whom we pay to represent our interests." He went on to say that although workers had demanded a meeting to "get an explanation as to how this (the sackings) happened," the union had simply ignored the requests.

There is no question but that tram and public transport workers oppose the sackings, as well as the ongoing attacks on their working conditions. But because their opposition remains confined within the political framework dictated by the unions and the government, they can see no way forward.

The lack of a political alternative is reflected in the actions taken by the sacked workers themselves. Under attack from the state Labor government and betrayed by their own union, one group of sacked workers demonstrated outside state parliament, then sought support from the Liberal Opposition leader Robert Doyle.

Doyle, of course, is as contemptuous of the plight of the sacked workers as Di Gregorio and Labor Premier Steve Bracks, because they all serve the same corporate interests. In fact, it was the Liberal government in 1999 which, with the aid of the unions, carried through the privatisation of the entire Victorian transport system, axing thousands of jobs in the process, including those of 1,000 tram conductors and rail guards.

Other sacked workers have mounted legal action to contest the legality of the dismissals and seek reinstatement. These

workers face the danger of becoming enmeshed in a morass of court challenges while the union and management continue to isolate them and bury the issue. Legal action must be an adjunct to, not a substitute for, the struggle to mobilise a broad political and industrial movement fighting for the independent interests of the working class.

While some workers may have been surprised by the unashamed collaboration of the RTBIU with the sackings, its actions were the continuation of the policies carried out by the public transport unions for more than a decade to subordinate workers to the program of privatisation and job cuts.

The all-out attack on jobs and conditions began in earnest in 1989 under the Cain state Labor government. Under the Accords struck through the 1980s between the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the federal Hawke Labor government the public transport unions committed themselves to assisting Cain. Nationally, the unions helped the employers to bring about a fundamental reversal in working conditions and an historic redistribution of income away from the working class to the coffers of big business.

In order to carry this through, the most militant sections of workers had to be disciplined. High on the list were Melbourne's tramway workers. In August 1989, the Cain government brought down a budget that slashed funding to public transport by \$150 million. Some months later it followed this up with a lockout of tramway workers across all depots to impose driver-only trams, eliminate conductors and introduce a scratch ticketing system.

Tram workers responded by setting up an indefinite tram blockade in the centre of Melbourne, which created a major political crisis for the government. The action attracted sympathy and support in broad sections of working people across the state who were themselves facing ongoing attacks on conditions and jobs.

With support for tram workers growing, the Australian Tramways and Motor Omnibus Employees Association (ATMOEA) under its leader, Di Gregorio, betrayed the struggle. Assisted by the "lefts" on the Victorian Trades Hall Council, Di Gregorio pushed through a return to work agreement that included a six-month trial of one-person operations.

Labor's attacks became the basis for a deepening assault by the Kennett Liberal government, which came to power in 1992. Although a wave of opposition greeted the new government, including a demonstration of 100,000 workers, students and professional people in Melbourne in November 1992, the unions brought it under control. The ATMOEA and Di Gregorio, along with the Public Transport Union, eventually signed a memorandum of understanding with Kennett allowing the destruction of 10,000 public transport jobs.

Between 1995 and 1998 the union negotiated and imposed a series of Enterprise Bargaining Agreements that surrendered a raft of working conditions. In 1997, in order to break up what

the government called "a culture of resistance," a number of tramway workers were sacked and blamed for accidents caused by worsening working conditions and one-person operations. The dismissals were designed to create an atmosphere of intimidation, similar to the operation being carried out today. The union then, as now, did nothing to defend the sacked workers.

The union's role enabled Kennett to push through the privatisation of the entire Victorian public transport system in 1999. As its reward, the union was granted coverage of the workers in the newly privatised industry. In this capacity, it served as an industrial police force for the new owners.

The union's betrayals have not merely been the product of the cowardice of a few self-seeking union leaders. Rather, they are the outcome of the bankruptcy of trade union politics and the perspective of national reformism that has dominated the workers movement for the past century.

No matter how militant, trade unionism has always accepted the right of capital to exploit labour. Acting as bartering agencies for the sale of labour power, the unions simply asked for a few more crumbs from the capitalist table. Today, the major employers worldwide are engaged in an unrelenting drive to take back all the gains won by the working class. Unable by their very nature to challenge the framework of the profit system, the unions have increasingly transformed themselves into outright agencies for the destruction of the very concessions they once advocated.

Public transport workers need to draw the necessary political conclusions and develop new forms of struggle that are independent of, and in complete opposition to, the trade unions and the Labor Party. The fight to defend jobs and conditions can only be sustained and broadened to the degree that workers base themselves on a socialist perspective that rejects the dictates of the profit system and aims at the reorganisation of society on the basis of genuine social equality.

Socialist Equality Party & WSWs Public Meeting

The Way forward for Tramway Workers

Sunday May 30, 2.30pm

"The Church" Meeting Room

10A Hyde Street Footscray

For further information email: sep@sep.org.au or call 02 9790 3511



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact