

Australia: tram union attacks SEP after “unauthorised” strike

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In defiance of Yarra Trams management and the Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union (RTBIU), tram workers at the Malvern depot in Melbourne struck for four hours on June 24, in opposition to the company’s attempts to force through new work rosters.

The rosters, which are being introduced at several depots, effectively increase the working hours of tram drivers to more than the current 40-hour week. They flow directly from the \$2.3 billion re-privatisation of the tram and train networks being undertaken by the Victorian Labor government, and are part of an ongoing drive to slash costs and boost profits.

Having already collaborated in the sacking of 100 tramway workers in March, the RTBIU is working closely with Yarra Trams to ram through the new system. The operation has become more frenzied in the last weeks because the company faces the prospect of fines under its hand-over contract with the government if it fails to implement changes or if there is a loss of services due to disputes.

The Malvern depot strike broke out after management arbitrarily posted the new rosters on the board, informing workers they would be operational from Sunday June 27. It then refused to repost the old rosters.

As drivers brought trams to the depot, both management and the union tried to intimidate them. A management representative confronted each driver, claiming there was no dispute because the new roster had been removed from the board. Later, at a depot meeting called without union authorisation, RTBIU official Phil Altieri told strikers they were engaged in “extreme action” and threatened there “could be legal repercussions”.

The union leadership’s main concern was that the action at Malvern would undermine its efforts to push through the roster changes elsewhere. On the eve of the strike, RTBIU state secretary Lou Di Gregorio told the Melbourne *Herald Sun* there was no strike threat and claimed that reports to the contrary were the result of a “small group of Malvern-based Trotskyites who craved media attention”.

In reality, there exists broad opposition among tram workers to the new rosters. Despite the union’s efforts, workers at the Malvern depot have rejected them four times and Glenhuntly workers voted them down yet again last week. At the Brunswick depot, workers eventually accepted the changes, but only after being pressured by Di Gregorio, along with several union delegates who were brought to Brunswick from other depots to back him up.

Di Gregorio’s derogatory designation “Trotskyites” is a reference to the Trotskyists of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), formerly the Socialist Labour League. The SEP and its supporters have a long history of principled struggle in defence of the rights and conditions of workers in the tramways and throughout the public transport system.

This has inevitably brought the party into sharp conflict with the unions, which have collaborated with every government over the past two decades—state and federal, Labor and Liberal—in implementing job cuts, privatisation and the wholesale destruction of working conditions.

The union’s alarm at the growing support for the SEP’s principled stand against the re-privatisation of the tramways and the recent job cuts was revealed in an extraordinary resolution passed at a closed-door executive meeting of the RTBIU Tram and Bus Division in early June. The executive meeting was held after the SEP had distributed a leaflet to tram workers detailing the union’s collaboration in the sackings, and reviewing the history of its betrayals.

The resolution affirmed the executive meeting “has full confidence in the union officials in the way they have represented members in all locations, regarding all union matters”. Unable to get a genuine vote of confidence from a meeting of workers, the union bureaucracy has been reduced to the farce of moving a vote of confidence in itself.

In his report Di Gregorio reported that “a socialist party” had circulated “propaganda” alleging that the union had “sold out members”, and insisting that “socialism was the only way forward for workers”. Di Gregorio continued: “These people have never been elected by anyone, they represent nobody and haven’t yet realised that this (socialism) is a failed system”. He then listed all the benefits supposedly won for tramway workers by the union.

Di Gregorio’s comments beg the question: if the socialists “represent nobody” and are merely propagators of a “failed system”, and the union has faithfully championed its members’ interests, why does the RTBIU leadership feel compelled to call an executive meeting to denounce them and engage in a pantomime of self-congratulation?

The reality is that the SEP has raised issues that resonate with large numbers of tramway workers who are suffering the results of the union’s betrayals, both past and present. These include the destruction of 1,000 tram conductors’ jobs and 12,000 jobs in public transport as a whole throughout the 1990s. Tram drivers now have to contend with increased workloads, escalating stress levels and dangerous working conditions. What remains of workers’ conditions, including those listed by Di Gregorio, will inevitably be targeted for demolition in the not-too-distant future.

As for Di Gregorio’s claim to have defended working conditions “in the face of privatisation”, it is a matter of record that the Kennett Liberal government could not have carried it through without the union’s assistance. The last combined stoppage of public transport workers in March 1997 was called by the union, not to oppose privatisation, but to pressure the Liberal government back into

negotiations after it had walked away from an “in principle” corporatisation agreement. The union’s overriding concern was to remain in the process and ensure it continued to represent dues paying members in the newly privatised set up.

Even after the collapse of the first privatisation, when National Express abandoned the project in December 2002, the RTBIU worked closely with the Labor government to attract a new owner. In January this year, union officials promised to work “in a spirit of cooperation and industrial harmony to ensure the success of an orderly handover”. Soon after, the mass sackings were announced, followed by the introduction of the new rosters.

Di Gregorio’s accusation against the SEP that it promotes “disunity” is particularly revealing. The “unity” espoused by the union leadership is, in reality, the subordination of workers to the dictates of the employers and the Labor government. It is the RTBIU that seeks to keep workers in the various depots separated from each other and to isolate any group of workers that takes up a struggle against the employers. One only needs recall the way in which the union helped impose the latest sackings in March, and then opposed the requests of Glenhuntly workers for a meeting to discuss the issue.

Workers should be warned that the union will stop at nothing to silence its opponents. In his report to the June 3 executive meeting, Di Gregorio, referring to the SEP’s leaflet campaign, castigated “some delegates for doing nothing to curb this attempt”.

The remark was clearly an attempt to encourage union functionaries to attack the SEP and its supporters—and it has had the required effect. A dirty tricks operation is already underway.

This week, an anonymous leaflet was circulated at the Malvern depot making a number of unsubstantiated accusations against the Malvern delegate, an SEP supporter and the Glenhuntly delegate, including a charge of “misleading” workers over the four-hour stoppage and issues relating to the fight against the rosters.

Although the diatribe was signed by “Concerned Drivers-Malvern Depot” it is clearly the work of the union bureaucracy. Firstly, it lauds precisely the same “gains” listed by Di Gregorio in his executive report. But, more significantly, any genuine worker who had concerns about the delegate’s positions had ample opportunity to voice them at the four-hour stop-work meeting at the Malvern depot on June 24. None were raised, and the meeting overwhelmingly passed a resolution threatening further industrial action if management persisted.

Tram workers are rightly hostile to the union and some, realising that it acts against their interests, have raised the need for independent committees to unite workers in defence of jobs and working conditions. This is an important development. Even the limited four-hour stoppage at Malvern, conducted in defiance of the union, has temporarily forced a management retreat on the new rosters.

It must be said, however, that establishing independence is not simply a question of an organisational break with the old union apparatus and the launching of some kind of rank-and-file committee with the same union-based politics. The workers movement, in Australia and internationally, is littered with the debris of such experiments—no matter how honorable the initial intentions of their organisers.

The independence of the working class requires a conscious break with the narrow nationalist outlook of trade union and reformist politics, which confines workers to the framework of the profit system and insists that, in the final analysis, their interests are bound up with those of the employers.

Any genuine struggle to defend and advance the conditions of the working class can only go forward to the extent that it is consciously based on, and guided by, a political perspective for the abolition of the profit system and the restructuring of society on the basis of entirely different priorities, to serve the needs of the vast majority and not profits of a wealthy few.

And tramway workers cannot fight the offensive of the employers and the government alone. Their experiences are simply a microcosm of what faces working people throughout Australia and internationally. The war on Iraq—a neo-colonial war of plunder against the Iraqi people—is being accompanied in the US, Britain, Australia and elsewhere by a war on the democratic rights and social position of the working class at home.

The struggle against this agenda requires nothing less than the development of a new political movement of the international working class, armed with a common internationalist and socialist outlook. The defence of jobs and conditions can only be developed and sustained on this basis.

That is why Di Gregorio and the union bureaucracy identify as their most dangerous adversaries those who fight for socialism. Hoping to play off the general lack of historical knowledge among workers, Di Gregorio parrots the timeworn refrain that the collapse of the Soviet Union signifies that socialism is a “failed system”.

What in fact collapsed in the Soviet Union was not socialism but Stalinism, the largest-ever self-serving labour bureaucracy. Like its smaller counterparts dominating the workers’ movement around world, the Stalinist bureaucracy, basing itself on a nationalist program, was the most bitter and unrelenting enemy of genuine socialism, persecuting its adherents in order to defend its own privileged position and influence.

Leon Trotsky and his followers waged a life-and-death struggle against Stalinism to defend the 1917 Russian Revolution and the gains of the first-ever workers’ state. That struggle was grounded on the internationalist perspective advanced today by the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties around the world.

We urge tram workers and all those looking for a way forward to turn to a study of these vital historical lessons. Become a reader and active supporter of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the online publication of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and attend the forthcoming meeting being organised by the Socialist Equality Party in Melbourne.

Public Meeting
Saturday July 10, 3.00 p.m.
Carlton Library
Meeting room (upstairs)
667 Rathdown St
North Carlton



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