Australia: an open letter to Melbourne tram workers

Why the Rail Tram and Bus Union is attacking the SEP

Chris Sinnema
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The following is an open letter issued by Socialist Equality Party supporter Chris Sinnema to answer malicious accusations made in an unsigned leaflet by supporters of the union leadership following a strike by tram workers at the Malvern depot on June 24.

Fellow workers,

On Tuesday June 29, an anonymous leaflet entitled "The Truth About the Sinnema Brothers" appeared in Melbourne, containing unsubstantiated accusations against three tram drivers: Mark Sinnema, the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) delegate at the Malvern depot, Mario Mizzi, the RTBU Glenhuntly delegate, and myself—a driver based at Malvern.

To start with—and as a general rule—I would advise all workers to treat anonymous leaflets with the greatest suspicion. They are usually slanderous, which is why the authors prefer to keep their identities secret.

This particular leaflet was mysteriously signed "Concerned drivers Malvern depot." But it is clearly the work of the Rail Tram and Bus Union bureaucracy—or its agents. It appeared just five days after the Malvern depot carried out a four-hour wildcat strike on June 24—in defiance of the union—against management attempts to impose regressive new rosters.

The aim of the leaflet is to discredit the three workers who are named. Mark Sinnema and Mario Mizzi have distinguished themselves by responding to the concerns of the workers who elected them and taking a principled stand against the new rosters. I, as a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party, have been targetted because of my well-known opposition to every government/management attack on working conditions, including the recent sacking of more than 100 tram workers. My persistent opposition has become a thorn in the side of the trade union leaders, because it has exposed their shameless collaboration with management.

The leaflet begins by posing the question "Why did this depot [Malvern] stop?" It goes on to insinuate the answer: the workers were hoodwinked by Sinnema and Mizzi, with my behind-the-scenes assistance.

Allow me to review how the strike actually arose.

Prior to June 24, three previous depot meetings had, despite the best efforts of union officials, already rejected the new rosters outright. In mid-May, a meeting of 100 drivers voted them down—along with an attempt by Yarra Trams to forcibly transfer a number of drivers from the Malvern depot to Brunswick.

Interestingly enough, this meeting was the first since the mass sackings on March 22, and many workers had expected a discussion on the fate of their sacked colleagues.

But the union had a very different idea. Having helped carry through the sackings, and in the process of preparing to implement the roster changes, the officials had no intention of submitting to a democratic discussion with their members.

The rosters were again rejected at a depot meeting on June 11. On June 21 the workers not only voted them down again, but passed a resolution that if management posted the new rosters, there would be a work stoppage.

At a further meeting on the same afternoon, Malvern drivers welcomed a fraternal visit by the Glenhuntly delegate, who reported that his depot opposed the roster and that the workers were prepared to take action. In fact management, fearing united action at the two depots, only averted a strike at Glenhuntly by temporarily withdrawing the rosters.

When management posted the new rosters at Malvern, the strike went ahead, in line with the workers' decision. Although the notice was subsequently removed, management continued to refuse to re-post the old rosters.

Since then, the union has resorted to its usual tactics of bullying and intimidation to force the workers to back down. Officials have repeatedly returned to the two depots and eventually they got the result they were after. And this, they claim, represents the will of the union membership!

Now the union is engaged in a witch-hunt against those who led the opposition. Meeting on July 1, the union executive resolved to remove Mark Sinnema as Malvern union delegate. It should be noted that they did this while Mark is on extended leave, for family reasons, and out of the country. The executive also tried to pressure Mario Mizzi to resign.

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The leaflet asks: *Why did Chris Sinnema campaign against the 2 percent increase and new roster when he applied for a management position?*

As a matter of principle, I reject selling off hard-won conditions. The 2 percent pay increase is nothing but a bribe for accepting the continuing destruction of our working conditions. The new rosters—which, in many cases, increase working hours beyond the 40-hour week—are part of the $2.3 billion re-privatisation of the tram and train networks by the Victorian Labor government. Their sole purpose is to cut costs in order to boost corporate profits.

As for the claim that I applied for a management position, my application was for a clerical position, on lower pay, to enable me to spend time with my young family. As tram workers are only too well aware, the intensive and high-pressure work regime that drivers are obliged to endure—the legacy of past union sell-outs—rules out any quality family life.

The anonymous leaflet writers allege that Mark Sinnema took the Malvern dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), with my approval, knowing it to be a "bosses court".

In fact, it is a matter of public record that the dispute was taken to the IRC by the management, Yarra Trams, with the union's support. The court ordered, under pain of fines, that the workers take no further action and directed management and the unions to "confer" on the new rosters.

The court is, indeed, a "bosses court". It also institutionalises the authority of the unions over workers. The path to its door has been worn very deep by generations of union bureaucrats seeking rulings that will assist them in heading off or closing down any independent workers' struggle.

The leaflet claims that my brother and I have simply been waging a personal vendetta against Yarra Trams because management supposedly refused our recent requests regarding leave entitlements. But the authors have failed to carry out the most basic procedure—that is, to consult the record. Had they done so they would have seen that that our requests were actually granted—and well before the decision to strike was taken.

My opposition to the management's agenda is grounded on political principles. It is based on a defence of the independent interests of tram workers against an attempt by the company—in collaboration with the state Labor government—to bolster its financial position at the direct expense of workers' rights and conditions.

The writers go on to charge that the position of the "Sinnema brothers" is that the "workers do not need a union".

Let me state my position. The union, staffed by high-paid well-heeled functionaries, no longer, in any way, represents the interests of tram workers. It has become nothing but an agent of the company and the state Labor government. This is not the product of the intentions, or cowardice of individual leaders. It flows organically from their political outlook—from their acceptance, at the most fundamental level, of the capitalist profit system and their accommodation to the reactionary framework of the nation state.

I have consistently urged workers to turn to building a new political party of the working class, that will fight for an entirely different political perspective—the unification of workers of all countries in a common struggle against capitalism and the re-organisation of social life, from top to bottom, along socialist lines—on the basis of genuine social equality.

Finally, the leaflet asks: *Why did the Sinnema brothers receive instructions from the Sydney Socialist Group to stop work regardless whether the roster was displayed or taken down?*

This is the most revealing comment of all. So distant are the leaflet's authors from the sentiments of ordinary workers, they cannot even imagine that opposition to the union leadership is anything other than the work of conspirators!

The Socialist Equality Party did not "order" the strike at Malvern. The action arose out of, and represents, the deep-going discontent of tram workers with a renewed assault on their jobs and conditions, and their hostility to the betrayals of the union.

It is the union bureaucrats who "instruct" the workers and take decisions on their behalf. The SEP has, on the contrary, sought to clarify the political issues at stake, by reviewing the historical record and disclosing the underlying driving forces of the deepening social and political crisis—not only for tram drivers in Melbourne, but for workers and young people everywhere.

Fraternally,
Chris Sinnema

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