

Lou Di Gregorio defends tramway sackings

Australian union continues to attack the SEP

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29 July 2004

When the Socialist Equality Party issued leaflets denouncing the Rail Tram Bus Industry Union (RTBIU) in the Australian state of Victoria for collaborating in the sacking of 100 tram workers earlier this year, the union leadership accused the SEP of lying.

The SEP leaflet had pointed to the union's role in assisting the Victorian Labor government in its \$2.3 billion privatisation of the state's rail and tram networks. The former owner National Express had abandoned the operation in December 2003, and for a year the RTBIU leadership had worked closely with the government to create conditions to attract a new owner.

Now the RTBIU State Secretary Lou Di Gregorio has made a further effort to discredit the SEP. But his *Secretary's Newsletter* issued earlier this month only serves to confirm that the union did in fact collaborate with the sackings—with the aim of cutting costs and boosting profits for the new owner, Yarra Trams.

Di Gregorio writes: "This union did not sell out. We did what we said we would do all along. This union looked after its members. *No one was sacked.*" (Emphasis added.)

Really? Tell that to all those tram workers who were thrown out of their jobs in March and who have since been forced to undertake a painful search for new employment. "No one was sacked," says Di Gregorio. They were just "not picked up" when Yarra Trams took over.

Such phrases are all too familiar nowadays. Union bureaucrats have become adept at employing them over the last 15 years to cover up their dirty role in the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs. Like their brothers and sisters in the tramways, workers in mining, steel, manufacturing, stevedoring and a host of other industries, were not sacked either. They were simply "not picked up" or "just let go", or their jobs were "restructured" or "downsized" or deemed "surplus to requirements".

The unions have even developed a specific terminology to obfuscate their collaboration with factory and plant closures. Their officials, workers have been told, are merely working to ensure the closure is "orderly." In reality, the officials work to suppress opposition so the workers can be pushed out the door with the least amount of fuss. This is sometimes achieved with

the aid of so-called "voluntary" redundancy packages.

Di Gregorio admits: "Of the 61 people that were not picked up by Yarra trams, 25 took a voluntary (redundancy) package, 20 were not financial members of our Union, and 3 people had resigned from our Union. The remaining 13 people were not picked up by Yarra Trams for reasons best known to them and Yarra Trams". He rounds off by saying that the union "will always support financial members".

While the figures quoted do not account for all the workers sacked in March, Di Gregorio's statement confirms that the union did not lift a finger to defend any of the jobs.

Dodging the fact that union members were also left to their fate, Di Gregorio goes on to claim that the union refused to help non-union workers because they "bludge" on their workmates. In other words, they supposedly gain from union-negotiated agreements, but contribute nothing to the unions in return.

This amounts to a searing indictment of the union itself. After all, why have so many thousands of workers either left the unions or refused to join them in the first place? Because they see no reason to be members of organisations that do nothing to defend or support them. Too many times officials have postured as their members' best friend, only to betray and side with the bosses. These experiences have had their impact. To the extent that any workers remain in the unions, it is largely because they can see no viable alternative.

This is certainly the case in the tramways. In our statement of May 27, "Critical lessons from the tramway sackings in Melbourne", the SEP revealed how, time after time, the tramways union had betrayed its members. For nearly a decade and a half, the union assisted both Labor and Liberal administrations to destroy thousands of public transport jobs, impose one-man operations on trams and enforce increased workloads. It then played the pivotal role in driving through the privatisation of the entire state public transport system.

During the same period, working conditions were systematically traded off in a series of union-brokered enterprise work agreements. Rather than non-union workers benefiting from union-negotiated agreements, the reality is that they, along with union workers, now work under ever-deteriorating conditions. Even the latest two percent pay increase—a pittance heralded by Di Gregorio as some kind of

major gain—has been conditional on tram workers accepting roster changes that result in a 41.15-hour workweek. It is worthwhile recalling that the 40-hour week was won by tram workers in 1947.

Di Gregorio can talk about “bludgers”, but one only has to look at the generous salaries and conditions enjoyed by union officials, even as those of their members decline, to see who the real freeloaders are.

As the SEP has made clear, remaining outside the unions is no solution, in and of itself, to these betrayals. None of the problems workers face can be resolved on an individual basis, or by entering a relationship with the employers, the capitalist courts or any other section of the establishment. The workers’ movement will only be revived on the basis of a political program that defends the independent interests of the working class as a whole—that is, a socialist program. And it is only on the basis of such a program that new and genuine workers’ organisations will be built.

It has become clearer over the last weeks that the destruction of tram workers’ jobs in March was the essential prerequisite for the further intensification of workloads. Tram drivers have informed the World Socialist Web Site and the SEP that the increase in working hours contained in the new rosters corresponds almost exactly to the number of jobs lost at each depot.

In the past, stand-by time would free staff to move trams around depots, relieve drivers who were sick or absent, or provide standby trams and drivers to enable services to keep running in the case of accidents and derailments. It has now been eliminated.

Since March, the union has carried out its pledge to work with Yarra Trams in a “spirit of cooperation and industrial harmony to ensure an orderly handover”. In April, the union executive signed off on an enterprise agreement allowing the sackings and roster changes. On June 25, Yarra Trams made a submission to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) for an order to stop industrial action against the new rosters, following a four-hour work stoppage by drivers at Malvern the day before. Company lawyer V. Gostencnik told the commission that the union had agreed to the new work arrangements as far back as April 23 and quoted the relevant clause stating, “there is a commitment by all parties to the achievement of productivity improvements outlined in the agreement through changes to work practices, working conditions and rostering arrangements”.

Gostencnik praised the role of the union executive, pointing out that it had not sanctioned the June 24 Malvern stoppage and declared, “we (the company) have no complaint sir, in relation to their conduct”. And why would they? The union has become nothing less than the company’s industrial relations arm—helping it to draw up and then impose its cost cutting plan.

Central to the operation was keeping tramway workers in the dark until the very last minute, so they would have no time to

organise a coordinated struggle against the changes. A flustered RTBIU assistant state secretary Phil Ateri complained to the AIRC that everything was going swimmingly until “the new proposed rosters hit the deck.” “Then there were problems coming out of Malvern depot, and the Glen Huntly depot, and to a lesser extent at the Brunswick depot,” he said.

The union’s response to the drivers’ opposition has been to step up its campaign of intimidation. This has included backing AIRC Commissioner William Mansfield—a former union official himself—when he threatened that further industrial action would result in heavy fines for individual workers. The RTBIU executive has organised to remove the union’s Malvern delegate from his position because he had the audacity to speak up for his members against the union in AIRC. The delegate at Glenhuntly has been told to resign.

Di Gregorio hopes that the union’s operation in the tramways will scare workers throughout the public transport system into accepting, without question, the further attacks on working conditions that will inevitably be demanded by the private owners.

But the union is becoming increasingly isolated. There is widespread hostility among tram workers to the employers and the union, and a growing desire to fight back. Workers must recognise, however, that their struggle can only be developed in conscious opposition to the Labor and trade union bureaucracy and that it requires a decisive break with trade union politics, which functions to restrict workers to the framework dictated by the profit system and its beneficiaries.

Meetings of current and former tramway workers, union and non-union, together with other public transport employees and supporters, along the lines of those recently organised by the Socialist Equality Party, should be convened on a regular basis. These can become forums for the broadest discussion on all the vital issues facing workers, above all, on the development of the fight for a socialist perspective, aimed at the complete reorganisation of society on the basis of genuine social equality.



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