

Melbourne transport workers vote for industrial action

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Train and tram workers in Melbourne have voted overwhelmingly for a campaign of industrial action over stalled negotiations for enterprise bargaining agreements with privatised transport operators Metro Trains and Yarra Trams.

Negotiations between the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the two companies have dragged on for almost five months, with no resolution on a series of issues. Metro workers voted 98 percent for industrial action, including protracted stoppages, while Yarra workers voted 99 percent.

The union is seeking an 18 percent pay rise over 3 years for almost 3,000 Metro workers and a number of other improvements, including a picnic day, a clothing allowance for plain clothes inspectors and discount train travel on Metro and V/Line rail services for Metro employees' families.

Metro is refusing to budge from its offer of a nominal wage rise between 2.5 percent and 3 percent annually, and is demanding changes aimed at boosting productivity. These include overturning restrictions on drivers performing more than 200 kilometres a day and operating trains on the same line repeatedly. The restrictions are designed to prevent fatigue and monotonous work that can affect driver concentration.

The 2,000 Yarra Trams workers are demanding an 18 percent pay increase over three years, but the company has offered only a paltry 9 percent. Other issues concern rostering guidelines, redundancy provisions and disciplinary processes.

The willingness of workers to take on the companies is in sharp contrast to the union. It has delayed any action, seeking to cobble together a sellout deal with Metro, Yarra and the Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

Since the almost unanimous votes for industrial

action, the RTBU has announced only four-hour off peak stop-work meetings next Friday, leaving plenty of time for behind-the-scenes manoeuvring.

Also planned are "travel free" days, with Metro staff refusing to man barriers at train stations and ticket inspectors refusing to issue infringement notices. These limited protest actions are designed to let off steam in a bid to contain workers' opposition, while preventing any serious disruption to the companies' operations.

If the brief stop-work goes ahead it will be the first transport stoppage in Melbourne since 1997, when rail unions called a token 48-hour strike to protest against the Kennett state Liberal government's plans to dissolve the Public Transport Corporation—a step toward the eventual privatisation of the entire transport system.

Having blocked any genuine fight against privatisation, the RTBU worked closely in 2003 with a state Labor government to attract fresh owners when National Express abandoned the operation. This collaboration included the destruction of tram jobs and the introduction of onerous new rosters.

RTBU Victorian secretary Luba Grigorovitch made it plain that the union was anxious to call off next Friday's stoppage. She told the media: "Negotiations and conversations are happening with both companies and the state government. However, at this point in time, nothing has come to fruition that would make us stop."

The union is continuing with talks despite both Metro and Yarra planning retaliatory measures. Metro has flagged it may activate a full or partial network shut down—that is impose virtual lockouts—in response to any stoppages or work bans.

The Andrews government denounced the workers for even voting for industrial action. Transport Minister

Jacinta Allan condemned the prospect of a stoppage as “provocative and unnecessary,” claiming it would “really punish passengers.”

The government’s intervention into the dispute is in line with its pledges to big business to prosecute its interests, just as the Labor Party did when previously in office between 1999 and 2010. The trade union movement, including the RTBU, pulled out all stops to secure a Labor victory in last November’s state election, mobilising officials and pouring in funds.

The rail and tram workers are part of an emerging opposition in the working class against the deepening, decades-long, assault on wages, jobs and working conditions via union-negotiated enterprise agreements. This included the week-long strike by Hutchison dock workers in Sydney and Brisbane, and the ongoing strike by Woolworths liquor warehouse workers in Melbourne, both in defiance of return-to-work orders by the federal government’s Fair Work Commission industrial tribunal.

The unions will work overtime to keep these disputes separated and isolated, with the aim of wearing down and demoralising the workers involved. To fight for decent pay and conditions, rail and tram workers must break with the RTBU, which has for decades worked in league with Labor and Liberal governments alike to impose the dictates of the employers.

Independent rank and file committees should be built to unite with other sections of workers, all of whom are facing similar attacks because of the worsening crisis of global and Australian capitalism. This means turning to a socialist perspective, based on the fight for a workers’ government that will place public transport, along with the banks and other basic industries, under democratic workers’ control.

The author also recommends:

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[29 July 2004]



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