

Australian transport union calls off Melbourne train and tram strike

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The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has cancelled four-hour, off-peak strikes scheduled for tomorrow by workers at Metro Train and Yarra Trams in Melbourne after the state Labor government condemned the industrial action and backed moves by the companies to have it banned. Neither company has made any concessions.

The industrial action was part of long-running negotiations by transport workers over two separate enterprise agreements. Talks between the companies and the union have dragged on for nearly five months.

The union had called for an 18 percent pay rise during the three-year agreement, but Metro and Yarra have refused to budge from the original offer of half that amount or 3 percent annually. Both companies are also demanding substantial cuts to basic conditions, including changes to rostering, shift lengths, poorer overtime provisions and, in the case of the Metro drivers, work changes that could impact on safety.

The union's call last week for limited strike action was aimed at defusing mounting resentment and anger among workers over the declining real wages and repeated demands for more "flexibility" and greater productivity. Significantly, Metro and Yarra workers voted overwhelmingly—98 percent and 99 percent respectively—to stop work.

The state Labor government reacted with undisguised hostility to the prospect of the first public transport strike in Melbourne since 1997, nearly two decades. Transport Minister Jacinta Allan issued an ultimatum on Monday demanding that the union call off the rail strike by 9 a.m. the next day. She previously had condemned even the threat of a transport stoppage as "provocative and unnecessary."

The Labor government was fearful that even a four-hour strike by 3,000 train and 2,000 tram workers

would encourage other sections of workers to press for higher wages and resist demands for axing conditions. That was the last thing that it wanted especially with talks due to begin next month for a new Victorian Public Service Agreement covering more than 32,000 employees.

With the backing of the Labor government, both companies applied for the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to intervene under Section 424 of the Fair Work Act to block the industrial action. Just prior to Metro's application, the company cancelled negotiations on Monday morning and gave the union until 5 p.m. that day to accept its pay offer and other demands.

Introduced in 2009 by the federal Rudd Labor government with the full support of the unions, the FWC has wide-ranging anti-democratic powers to penalise workers. Section 424 gives the FWC sweeping authority to terminate or suspend any industrial action it deems could "endanger the life, the personal safety or health, or the welfare, of the population or of part of it," or cause "significant damage to the Australian economy."

The Fair Work Act also outlaws all industrial action, except during limited enterprise bargaining periods, and bans any solidarity action by workers across enterprises. The unions invariably use FWA rulings as the pretext for shutting down industrial action and the means for intimidating workers.

The union immediately caved in to the Metro ultimatum. RBTU state secretary Luba Grigorovitch told the media on Monday that the union was calling off the rail walkout, claiming that Metro's offer to recommence negotiations represented "a significant step forward."

At the same time, Grigorovitch declared that the tram stoppage was still on. By Wednesday, however, the

RBTU had called off the tram walkout after meeting with representatives of Yarra Trams and the state Labor government in the Fair Work Commission.

Transport Minister Jacinta Allan was jubilant. She told the media that the union and Metro Train and Yarra Tram managements had agreed to resume negotiations following a recommendation by the Fair Work Commission. “Good news for passengers. Trains and trams running on Friday as usual,” she tweeted.

The government’s actions are fully in line with Labor’s pledges during the Victorian state election last November to defend big business and assist in slashing costs and boosting profits at the expense of workers. The unions worked tirelessly for the election of a state Labor government, mobilising officials to perpetrate the lie that it represented the “lesser evil” compared to the Liberal Party.

The rapidity with which the RBTU called off the strike makes clear that the union leadership had only ever intended the stoppage to be a protest to let off steam. The applications by the companies to the FWC simply provided the excuse for the union to return to the negotiating table where it will ultimately stitch up a deal to impose the demands of management.

The unions have played the same treacherous role in every dispute. Even as the RTBU executive was calling off the transport strike this week, their fellow bureaucrats in other unions were selling out sacked Hutchison dock workers in Sydney and Brisbane, and shutting down a picket by warehouse workers at Woolworths’ Liquor Distribution Centre in Melbourne.

The assault on transport workers and other sections of the working class in Australia is part of a global offensive by international finance capital. Governments in every country are backing the employers’ drive to slash costs and offload the burden of the worsening global breakdown of capitalism onto the backs of the working class.

Metro and Yarra workers should take a stand by rejecting the sell-out deals being prepared by the union and launching their own struggle for decent wages and conditions. A first step is the establishment of genuine rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and led by trusted representatives democratically elected by transport workers. These committees should turn out to other sections of workers in Australia and internationally facing similar attacks.

Such a struggle will inevitably involve a political fight against the Labor and union apparatus, as well as the companies and capitalist courts, and must be based on a new political perspective. The right to a job, decent wages and working conditions can only be established in the struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies. The banks and key industries, including transport, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and the society as a whole reorganised from top to bottom to meet the social needs of the majority not the profits of a wealthy few.



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