

Australia: Melbourne tram drivers strike over wages and conditions

Our correspondents

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Hundreds of tram drivers joined a four-hour stoppage in Melbourne on Thursday in a dispute over the terms of a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) with their employer, Yarra Trams. The stoppage, from 10:00 a.m. till 2:00 p.m., was the first by the city's tramway workers since 1997.

Despite denunciations by the Victorian state Labor government, metropolitan train drivers have voted for a similar stoppage next Friday. Premier Daniel Andrews branded the tram stoppage "unjustifiable" and threatened to join court action by tram and train companies to outlaw any further industrial action.

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), which has coverage over the tram and rail workers, sought to avert the tram stoppage through weeks of closed-door negotiations with the company, and then worked to minimise the strike's effect by confining it to off-peak travel times.

RBTU Tram and Bus Division state secretary Phil Alteri apologised abjectly for the stoppage. "We don't want to inconvenience passengers," he said. "The trouble is when you get to these circumstances when you've tried and tried and tried, and you're not getting where you need to be and the company is not doing things in good faith, it doesn't leave you with much option at the end of the day."

The tram drivers and Metro Trains workers have voted overwhelmingly for industrial action over wages and conditions, but the union has so far prevented any joint industrial action.

In an effort to undermine the tram strike, Yarra Trams mobilised around 100 buses to replace trams along selected routes. It also sent letters to workers' homes to try to intimidate them, declaring that the strike action would result in the loss of up to \$121 each in wages.

The union has proposed a 19 percent wage rise over

four years, barely enough to match inflation. Yarra Trams is offering only 15 percent over the same period, contingent on trade-offs, mainly associated with rostering.

Premier Andrews lined up totally behind Yarra Trams. He attacked the tram drivers for rejecting the company's offer, declaring that their stand "would jar with many, many Victorians who are unlikely to get that sort of pay rises any time soon." By this statement, Andrews also made clear his support for the ongoing driving down of real wages by employers across the board.

The RBTU, which is affiliated to the Labor Party, called off a planned joint stoppage by rail and tram workers the previous Friday, saying it was prepared to give the companies time to come up with better offers. According to the union, negotiations with Yarra Trams have been proceeding since April and a draft agreement was reached on August 11.

Workers have been kept in the dark about the exact contents of the proposed EBA. At a mass meeting of about 400 workers on Thursday, the RBTU's Phil Alteri sought to soften up workers for a sell-out, claiming that the main issue was not a wage rise but defending conditions.

While acknowledging that the proposed changes to rostering guidelines would cost workers money, he argued that the company's plans had some benefits. At the same time, he maintained that Yarra Trams had not produced the full details of the roster proposals, even after the union's many intensive talks with the company.

Alteri and other union officials, who urged a Labor vote in last year's state election, were silent on the Labor government's opposition to any strike action. Labor governments have a long record of backing

assaults on public transport workers.

In August 1989, the Cain state Labor government locked out tramway workers when they opposed Labor's removal of conductors from trams. Workers set up an indefinite tram blockade in the centre of Melbourne, gaining wide support from the public. However, then tramway union leader, Lou Di Gregorio, pushed them back to work on the basis of a six-month trial of driver-only trams.

The public transport unions also sold out the last strike in 1997, signing a workplace agreement with Kennett Liberal government for the privatisation of the suburban train and tram networks. Transport Minister Allan Brown paid "particular tribute to the union leaders" for "forging this historic agreement."

As always, the unions' only concern in 1989 and 1997 was for the governments, whether Labor or Liberal, to maintain the services of the union bureaucracy as the most effective way to enforce their agendas.

Over the past three decades, every EBA has contributed to the steady erosion of tramway workers' conditions, including a two-tier wage structure for new drivers, cuts to driver training times and the extension of work hours. Workers face constant pressure from Yarra Trams to maintain unrealistic schedules, while having to deal with poorly maintained trams and infrastructure.

Several tramway workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* following Thursday's mass meeting.

Jack has worked for six years as a tram driver, after losing his previous job of 17 years when South Pacific Tyres shut down in 2009. "I used to work in manufacturing," he explained. "Driving trams is a stressful job, with a lot of responsibility. Yarra Trams makes out that we earn a lot of money but I made more working in manufacturing. The base pay is not enough.

"I normally work 48 to 50 hours a week and do a lot of DOCs [days off cancelled]. Most drivers do overtime. Another thing is there is a lot of turnover of drivers. They spend a lot training drivers but if they looked after us, not as many would leave."

Another worker commented: "There has been no indication from the union about what is actually in the new EBA that they are negotiating. They have had depot meetings in which they have put forward resolutions to give the union executive the authority to

continue negotiating.

"99.4 percent voted for industrial action. So far it has been limited to bans doing extra shifts and overtime. They are having a ban on wearing uniforms. This is a joke. It isn't going to hurt the company.

"The strike was called off last Friday and the union says they are still negotiating. We are told nothing and there has been nothing in the media."

It is clear that the fight for decent pay and conditions can only go forward in a direct political fight, not just against the private transport operators but the Labor government that stands behind them and the union that enforces their demands.

There is an urgent need for workers to develop new forms of struggle, including rank-and-file committees, independent of, and in complete opposition to, the Labor Party and the trade unions. To fight the dictates of the profit system requires the turn to a socialist perspective and the struggle for a workers' government to place public transport under social ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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