

Australia: State Labor government attacks striking train staff

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The Labor government in Victoria denounced poorly-paid rail workers in Melbourne, the state capital, for taking even limited industrial action last Thursday, Friday and Saturday over the terms of a new enterprise agreement. For the second time in two weeks, Premier Daniel Andrews's government joined hands with transport employers Yarra Trams and Metro Trains, in a bid to ban the stoppages.

Train drivers held one-hour pre-dawn stoppages on Thursday and Saturday, while station staff, signallers and customer services officers stopped work for four hours, from 10 a.m. till 2 p.m., on Friday. These were the first stoppages by the city's rail workers in 18 years. They went ahead despite every effort by the Labor Party-affiliated Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) to call off the stoppages by striking a sellout deal with Metro Trains.

The rail walkouts followed strike action the previous week by tram drivers in a wages and conditions dispute with Yarra Trams. Tram drivers plan to strike again this Thursday. The RTBU, which covers both the rail and tram workers, has told the media that it is ready to halt all industrial action if the companies make further offers.

Amid a barrage of corporate media denunciations of the rail workers, the Andrews government and Metro Trains unsuccessfully took last-minute legal action in the federal government's Fair Work Commission (FWC) to ban the industrial action. In the FWC hearing, the Labor government branded the strike as "irresponsible" and claimed it would endanger the safety of Melbourne residents.

Public Transport Minister Jacinta Allan sought to incite hostility against the train workers, declaring that some people "have to lose a day's pay because they haven't been able to get to work today," adding: "They're the people who have every reason to feel angry and fed up with this action that's been taken."

In a bid to prevent a confrontation with the Labor

government, the RTBU is continuing behind-the-scenes negotiations with Metro Trains and Yarra Trams, which are private transport companies. Before last Friday's rail strike, RTBU state secretary Luba Grigorovitch assured the media and the government that the union had ensured that the stoppage would not impact the public "severely."

At a rally of several hundred train workers outside Victorian Trades Hall in Melbourne on Thursday, Grigorovitch and RTBU national secretary Bob Narva sought to sow illusions that the Labor government could be pressured to shift its backing for the corporate elite. Narva declared: "The Labor Party was put into government by the union movement. Now look at the way they have treated the RTBU. We need to remind them who put them there and why."

These comments were aimed at covering up the union's own political record. The RTBU has repeatedly called for a Labor vote in state and federal elections, claiming that Labor represents a "lesser evil" to the Liberal Party.

In reality, the Andrews government's joint actions with Metro Trains against the public transport workers is consistent with Labor's ongoing assault on the working class, which has been enforced by the RTBU at every turn.

Victorian public transport was first privatised by the Kennett Liberal government in 1999. In 2003, when National Express handed back the private franchise, the RTBU assisted the Bracks Labor government to reprivatise the network at the expense of workers' jobs and conditions.

In the current enterprise agreement negotiations with Metro Trains, the union has proposed a 19 percent wage rise over four years, which is barely enough to match inflation, let alone the increasing cost of living for workers in Melbourne.

Metro Trains, whose profits are reported to have increased 45 percent in the past three years, has offered

just 17 percent over the same period, contingent on a series of trade-offs. It wants cuts in overtime penalty rates, an extension of the working day to help the government and company to introduce 24-hour services on the weekends, and major changes to rostering and disciplinary procedures.

The implications are far-reaching. Workers could be required to start and finish work at different distant places, then return to the starting point in their own time. They could be ordered to report for work with as little as 11 hours' notice. Fatigue management would be eliminated.

Metro Trains wants to reintroduce "Repetitive Running," removing restrictions on the number of times a train driver can travel up and down the same line. Repetitive Running has historically been linked to rail accidents. The company also wants to cut the drivers' training period from 68 to 41 weeks.

The Metro Trains attack on wages and working conditions, like the demands being made by Yarra Trams, is part of a generalised assault by big business and governments—Labor and Liberal alike—on the entire working class, including on the waterfront and in the car and steel plants, where thousands of jobs are threatened.

With the RTBU intent on negotiating sell-out deals with Metro and Yarra, transport workers can only prevent a defeat by breaking the union's stranglehold over the dispute. Tram, bus and train workers should establish genuine rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and turn to other sections of workers in facing similar attacks—wharfies and workers in the steel, car and other key industries.

Labor's efforts to outlaw any strike action makes clear that this involves a political fight, not just against the transport companies, but the entire Labor and trade union apparatus. What is required is a diametrically opposed political perspective—a socialist one. The right to a job, decent wages and working conditions can be established only in the struggle for a workers' government based on a socialist program to place public transport, along with the banks and other key industries, under social ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

After Thursday's rally several rail workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

John, a public transport worker for 15 years, said: "I blame the government, and people close to the government. Labor and Liberal are no different. The Labor government was once good. But I don't trust any

of them now. They are all for their interests—and the people pay for everything...

"Once our taxes looked after the problems of the people. Now look at the world we live in. Workers are getting squashed more and more, and we are very pushed. Do it, or get out. It isn't good. They make the rules and the laws, and push it on other people..."

"We are not overpaid. Look at the bills these days. My observation is that people at the bottom are getting squashed and squashed. They don't listen to us. We want to live a balanced life, but we're treated like zombies or robots..."

"There is a lot of frustration, I feel it. People are so tired, stressed, angry and nobody listens. There is insecurity—will I have a job tomorrow? Fear is very dominant—we didn't have that before.

"Which side is the union are on? It is not the same union, it's quite a different union and I don't know what they are doing behind the doors. These days they are toothless tigers but they all get paid for what they do."

Frank, a station worker for decades, said: "It is power and greed... They [Metro Trains] have sufficient funds, they are making huge profits. Where does the money go? They all want to make billions of dollars. Money goes to more money, by nature..."

"I don't know how implicated unions and management are, but they are buddies. At the end of the day, they conform to each other's needs. They co-operate... It's clear we're being cheated. Even a kid could work it out. We're living in a false controlled economy."



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