

Australia: Union shuts down industrial action by public transport workers

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Responding to demands by the Victorian state Labor government and big business, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has called off limited industrial action by public transport workers and declared its “support” for new enterprise agreements with transport providers, Metro Trains and Yarra Trams.

Over the past three weeks there have been two four-hour tram strikes and a separate four-hour rail walkout—the first action by Victorian public transport workers in over 17 years—for new enterprise agreements.

Employers claim that the limited industrial action had cost the state economy over \$100 million. The state Labor government has joined forces with the private transport providers on two occasions to try and illegalise the strike action.

Premier Daniel Andrews and Transport Minister Allan denounced striking public transport workers, branding their action as “provocative and unnecessary.”

On September 18, tram division union officials declared their “in-principle” agreement with Yarra Trams and announced an end to all industrial action. Last Friday, rail division officials cancelled a scheduled four-hour rail strike for Thursday this week and work bans in the lead-up to the Australia Football League grand final this weekend in Melbourne.

RTBU state secretary Luba Grigorovitch said that she was “not prepared to go into any detail” on the rail workers’ enterprise deal. The union, she said, only had an agreement on “key terms” but these were “just enough to justify withdrawing industrial action.”

In other words, the union, which is affiliated to the Labor Party and actively campaigned for it in the last state election, was prepared to do anything to stop the scheduled rail strike and a political confrontation with the state government. From the outset of the six-month dispute, the union has sought to keep rail and tram workers isolated from each other and impose the demands

of government and employers.

Yarra Trams management told the media last week that it was “delighted” with the “in principle” agreement with the RTBU tram division. Tram division secretary Phil Altieri said the union was “very happy” and that tram workers would receive a 17 percent wage increase over four years. The deal, he claimed, would “definitely improved conditions for our members.”

Altieri also praised Transport Minister Allan, saying she deserved “credit” for playing a “key role in bringing the parties together and ultimately getting the agreement that was acceptable to everybody,” he said. Allan hailed the RTBU decision to withdraw all industrial action, declaring last Friday night that the union’s rail division to cancel this Thursday’s strike was “great news” and “in the best interests of passengers and the Victorian public.”

While the unions, the government and employers are congratulating themselves, public transport workers are being deliberately kept in the dark. No precise details have been provided. Tram and train division union officials are still holding closed door meetings in the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to finalise the deals.

RTBU tram division officials are currently holding “Information Meetings” at Melbourne tram depots. The division has released just two documents, a total of five pages, on its “in principle” deal. The final agreement will not be available for members to read for about two weeks. It will supposedly be displayed at depots for 10 days before members are balloted.

The RTBU’s rail division union has released no details whatsoever on its closed-door discussions with Metro Trains.

Yarra Tram’s 17 percent offer includes a 14 percent rise over four years—in other words, just 3.5 percent annually. The official annualised inflation rate was 1.5 percent for the June quarter. Workers will only get the additional 3 percent—2 percent next January and 1 percent a year

later—if they endorse Homesafe, the state government’s plans to transform public transport to a 24-hour operation.

The joint Yarra Trams-RTBU deal reportedly includes the introduction of trauma and family violence leave as well as an increase in parental leave. Yarra Trams have said they will give four weeks’ notice for any changes in the Master Time Table. The union has provided no concrete details.

The slight increase in the base pay and the two one-off payments, along with the unexplained trauma and family leave provisions, are an attempt to stop tram workers from considering the adverse long-term implications for their working conditions when Homesafe becomes operational.

Homesafe is one of several Labor government measures to impose “flexible” working conditions on tram and rail workers. These plans are already far advanced.

The RTBU has also been holding ongoing discussions with Yarra Trams about the development of a Public Transport Victoria Hub located in central Melbourne to house Yarra Trams administrative staff. Yarra Trams anticipates that up to 500 tram drivers, or a quarter of its workforce, will have their meal breaks at the new facility enabling greater flexibility in rostering and other cost-cutting measures to restructure the current suburban depot structure.

Metro Trains wants to divide the metropolitan rail system into five. The plan is to restrict drivers to single sections, enabling drivers to be deskilled because they will only be trained to operate in one part of the network. RTBU locomotive division secretary Marc Marotta has admitted this will “open the door to a new grade of lower-paid staff.”

Tram and rail workers’ frustration and anger at the ongoing erosion of their working conditions was reflected overwhelmingly in votes in support of strike action. A RTBU survey of 1,100 members in March highlighted deep discontent with existing working conditions and rostering issues, in particular. Over 90 percent of those surveyed said they were “extremely dissatisfied at “not being provided sufficient ‘journey time’ on rostered runs at all times of day.”

Tram workers are already faced with a two-tier wage system. Second-tier workers are paid on a sliding scale, starting their first year of employment at \$172.70 per week less than a worker with one year’s experience. These low paid workers can be slotted into a new multi-skilled category of Tram Driver/Customer Service Employee, which was also introduced in the last enterprise agreement in 2012. They can be allotted to

customer service functions and also be asked to fill in for drivers, but not be paid accordingly. These employees can be kept in this category for up to 18 months.

The RTBU’s shut down of all industrial action and the deepening of its collaboration with Yarra Trams and Metro Rail in response to Labor’s demands is yet another demonstration that public transport workers have to break from the political stranglehold of the unions. The union’s refusal to provide any real details on its “in-principle” agreements is because it fears that any democratic discussion will result in these deals being rejected by public transport workers.

The fight to defend living standards and working conditions involves a political and organisational break from the RTBU. Like the rest of the trade union movement, the RTBU is not a workers’ organisation in any meaningful sense but joint partners in the government and employers’ assault on the working class.

Public transport workers should reject the enterprise deals now being cooked up by the union in the Fair Work Commission and fight for a unified campaign for decent wages and conditions.

This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees under the democratic control of public transport workers and a turn other sections of the working class—in the car, steel, mining, waterfront and other key industries. Such a struggle requires a new political perspective directed against the profit system—the root cause of the attacks on workers. This involves a political fight for a workers’ government to implement 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.



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