

Australia: Union keeps tram workers in dark over new agreement

Our correspondent
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Tramway workers in Melbourne have been told bluntly by the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) that it will not show them a new enterprise agreement—negotiated behind their backs with their employer, Yarra Trams—until after they have voted to accept it.

Responding to demands by the Victorian state Labor government and big business, on September 18 the RTBU called off limited industrial action by the city's tram and train workers. These were the first stoppages by Victorian public transport workers in over 17 years. Premier Daniel Andrews had denounced the workers, branding their actions as “provocative.”

In a document entitled, “2015 Enterprise Agreement Wash Up,” released on the RTBU's web site, Victorian Tram and Bus division secretary Phil Altieri declared that the union had fully endorsed an “In Principle” agreement and urged members to attend Depot Meetings/Information Sessions for the full picture of what it contained.

Far from being presented with the “full picture,” workers have been given only a three and a half page “snapshot” of “improvements” supposedly made during negotiations. Considering that the previous enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) in 2012 contained 91 pages, workers are asking what the rest of the agreement contains.

The fact that the new EBA will not be released is an expression of the deeply undemocratic nature of the RTBU. It is operating in partnership with the corporate transport operators to impose on workers the demands of the state Labor government and Yarra Trams for increases in productivity, job cuts and lower wages. This agenda includes Homesafe, the government's planned restructuring of Melbourne's public transport into a 24-hour operation.

Conscious of the hostility that exists among tramway workers to their already poor working conditions, Altieri knows full well that if workers were allowed to study the new agreement, they would be likely to reject it outright.

It is clear that the “highlights” being presented are a smokescreen for the concessions and trade-offs that the union has agreed with Yarra Trams and the Labor government.

At an “information session” conducted by the union at the Malvern tram depot on September 29, workers challenged Altieri as to why they were not given the full EBA to consider.

During question time a worker asked Altieri if he had a copy of the agreement on him. Altieri replied that he did. “Well can we grab a copy of it?” the worker asked. “Can I get it and I will run off copies upstairs.” Altieri refused.

When challenged, Altieri then claimed that his was only a draft copy. The worker responded by asking: “Well what's going to change from being a draft copy to being a full blown copy?”

Altieri proceeded to dismiss the workers' democratic right to see the agreement, saying: “You the members entrust, voted for us and this is how we deal with it.”

The worker retorted: “Tell me what members told you there would be no more industrial action? And why did we find out through the media at 8pm that night that you have an agreement in principle with Yarra Trams and you told everyone else before you told us?”

The worker added: “You don't even come here presenting us with an EBA to vote on. You won't even let us have a look at it.”

Altieri then declared that the only time workers would see the full agreement would be after a vote had been taken. This contradicted earlier claims from

RTBU officials that the EBA would be posted 10 days before the vote was taken.

Expressing his frustration at the union's indifference to the conditions already facing tram employees, the worker said: "You have no idea what it is like since they brought in free trams in the CBD (Central Business District). Everyone is stressed out of their eye balls. We take a sickie, then we have these managers telling us we can't do this and that. There is no support."

He later told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "This is going along the lines of other industries. We are going through the same thing, where you can't trust what you are being told. The feeling around the depot is: 'What have they got to hide, if they don't want to show us a copy of the EBA?'"

The RTBU is doing the same with workers employed by the suburban train operator, Metro Trains. On September 23, after the Labor government's intervention, the union also called off their industrial action on the basis of an "in principle" agreement. As with the tramways, few details have been released.

The RTBU-Yarra Trams EBA terms being hidden from view include greater "flexibility" in rostering and other cost-cutting measures to restructure the suburban tram depot structure. The Metro Trains EBA divides the metropolitan rail system into five sections, enabling drivers to be deskilled and opening the way for what RTBU locomotive division secretary Marc Marotta described as a "new grade of lower-paid staff."

The tram and train workers must insist on the right to study the full union-employer EBAs and all such secret documents. But they should be under no illusion that by rejecting the proposed agreements, they can pressure the RTBU into coming back with better deals.

For the past three decades, the trade unions have played a critical role in breaking up the resistance of workers to the attacks launched by both Labor and Liberal-National governments against jobs, wages and conditions. The unions are not workers' organisations. They are driven by material interests, including superannuation board memberships and other government and employer perks, that are diametrically opposed to those of their memberships.

While tramway workers have shown their resolve to fight, with 99 percent voting for industrial action in the first place, what is lacking is a clear political

understanding of what they confront. The defence of even the most minimal gains can only begin through a break from the pro-business Labor Party and union apparatuses.

To defeat the planned RTBU sellout of their conditions, the public transport workers need to form genuine rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the RTBU and under the democratic control of workers. These committees would work to unify all tram and rail depots, workshops and station and office staff. They would turn out to all the other sections of the working class, including the car, steel, mining and engineering workers, facing similar assaults on jobs, conditions and wage levels.

This struggle can only be developed on the basis of the fight for an opposed political perspective—for the working class to take power and reorganise society along socialist lines for the benefit of all, not the tiny financial elite. A workers' government would implement a socialist program that would include placing 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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