

Australia: Melbourne rail workers vote for strike action

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More than 3,000 rail workers in Melbourne are threatening to strike and take other industrial action this month.

The workers—including train drivers, guards, station hands and support staff—are members of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU). They voted 99 percent in favour of industrial action in a union ballot, announced on July 29, which was held as part of ongoing negotiations for a new four-year enterprise agreement with Metro Trains.

In talks that began in February, the company offered annual wage rises of just 2 percent, a real wage cut given increases in costs of living for workers, against 6 percent requested by the RTBU. Metro Trains also wants to slash overtime payments for part-time workers and abolish increased wage rates for drivers working on their entitled day off.

Rail workers face enormous pressures in Melbourne, Australia's fastest growing city. According to government figures, there were 237 million passenger trips taken on Melbourne's city rail network last year, nearly double the 124 million trips taken in 2000. Existing lines have had to absorb the rising number of passengers, with grossly inadequate public infrastructure investments made by successive Labor and Liberal governments at both the federal and state levels.

Melbourne is Australia's only state capital to have a fully privatised train network after the then Liberal state government of Premier Jeff Kennett sold the infrastructure in 1999. Metro Trains has operated the network since 2009 and has the franchise until 2024. Metro is joint-owned by construction giant John Holland (with a 20 percent stake), UGL (another 20 percent), and Hong Kong-based MTR Corporation (60 percent).

Enjoying annual revenues of more than \$10 billion, MTR operates multiple railways in Asia and Europe. Last March, the *Age* reported that the transnational corporation reported to shareholders that Melbourne's Metro Trains was a "key driver" of a 14 percent revenue rise in the first six months of 2018. Metro Trains now receives \$786 million a year in public funds, up by 20 percent, or \$164 million annually, on its previous contract with the Labor state government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

While privatisation has provided new and lucrative profit opportunities for corporate operators, it has proven a disaster for rail workers and commuters.

Part of the privatised rail contract involves Metro Trains being financially penalised for failing to meet punctuality and reliability targets. The company has responded by demanding rail workers do whatever is required to ensure the targets are delivered. Train drivers have previously been routinely instructed to drive past as many stations as required to reach the destination on time, leaving numerous passengers stranded as several trains pass them by.

Melbourne trains have the worst satisfaction rating out of all Australia's major cities. Overcrowding is rife, including during non-peak hours. Several train lines have a non-peak hour service of just one train every 20 minutes, or even every 40 minutes on Sunday mornings.

A determined struggle of rail workers in defence of decent wages and conditions and for an end to the disastrous privatisation experiment would win widespread support within the working class. The RTBU bureaucracy, however, is determined to prevent the emergence of such a struggle. The union aims to keep rail workers within the straitjacket of the Fair Work industrial laws, limiting any industrial action to

the most ineffective and token protest while working out another sell-out on wages and conditions behind the backs of the railway workforce.

Despite the near unanimous vote for strike action, RTBU Victorian branch secretary Luba Grigorovitch (a former Labor Party parliamentary staffer and aspiring parliamentarian) announced Monday a series of actions on the “lighter” end of possible authorised actions.

These include rail workers opening up barriers and refusing to check commuters’ tickets on the following two Mondays. In addition, workers will maintain uniform bans and other workplace restrictions such as not driving trains with damaged passenger intercoms, and a ban on reporting late running trains.

The RTBU is isolating the rail workers from their colleagues in the regional V/line train network and in the tram system. Enterprise agreements for both sections of workers have expired, yet there is no combined fight for decent wages and working conditions for all public transport workers.

Last month, the RTBU again demonstrated its subservience to the Fair Work industrial regime and the state Labor government. It explained to one of its members via Facebook that negotiations for a new V/line agreement had not begun “because the Government have not approved the Log of claims, so therefore we cannot begin bargaining until this occurs,” adding that the union had “written to the Government numerous times to fast track the process.”

Tram drivers with the privatised Yarra Trams are likewise without an enterprise agreement. The RTBU has been in negotiations since March and last month lodged a request for protected industrial action with the Fair Work Commission.

Rail and tram workers can only advance their interests by taking the struggle for an agreement out of the hands of the RTBU bureaucracy. Lessons must be drawn from the union’s long record of promoting its own financial and political interests by collaborating with corporate management and the government.

Early last year in New South Wales the union betrayed a struggle of 9,000 rail staff. After enforcing an anti-democratic Fair Work Commission ban on strike action, the RTBU endorsed via postal ballot an agreement involving a wage rise of just 3 percent, numerous anti-worker “productivity savings,” and facilitating further pro-business restructuring measures

(see: “Australian train workers denounce NSW rail sellout”).

New organisations of struggle are required. Rail and tram workers should form independent rank-and-file committees in every depot and centre. These committees would break the isolation imposed by the RTBU, co-ordinating joint industrial and political action by public transport workers through mass meetings of workers.

Transport workers need to turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar pressures in their workplaces, and to working people affected by the subordination of public transportation to the accumulation of corporate profit.

The fight of Metro Trains workers for better wages and conditions is inseparable from the organisation of a political fight against the state Labor government which serves the interests of the corporate oligarchy, and for bringing the transport system under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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