

Australia: Train workers' union calls off Melbourne strike

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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has called off a planned strike of 3,000 train workers in Melbourne, with the union bureaucrats claiming unspecified “progress” in their closed-door discussions with Metro Trains management on a new four-year enterprise agreement.

The strike, scheduled for 10am to 2pm on August 27, had been approved in a ballot last month by 99 percent of rail workers. In preemptively shutting down the industrial action, the RTBU has signalled its eagerness to once again sell out the train workers. The union is intent on delivering yet another agreement that ensures continued profits for the transnational consortium that owns the privatised rail network, as well as industrial “peace” on behalf of the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

Metro Trains is majority owned by Hong Kong-based giant MTR Corporation. It wants to cap nominal wage rises to 2 percent annually—a real wage cut—while the RTBU has requested 6 percent. Management is also demanding concessions on workplace conditions, including reduced minimum hours for part-time workers and the effective elimination of restrictions on the proportion of part-time staff employed. These measures would further casualise the rail workforce, gutting job security and intensifying the enormous pressures placed every day on workers to meet service benchmarks and quotas.

Earlier this month, the RTBU had responded to the stalled negotiations on the new enterprise agreement with a proposed industrial campaign involving token actions, such as uniform bans and restrictions on commuter ticket checks.

MTR management then launched another provocation, emailing all workers with threats that even these limited measures would result in docked wages.

The emails relied on the last federal Labor government’s anti-democratic “Fair Work” industrial laws, telling rail workers there were legal restrictions on them receiving any strike pay. Workers were also reminded that in 2015, during previous enterprise agreement negotiations, the state Labor government backed the company when it went to court to oppose proposed strike action.

In response, RTBU state secretary Luba Grigorovitch wrote to RTBU members on August 9, denouncing the “disgraceful attempt to intimidate.” Her faux outrage was centrally directed, however, toward promoting reactionary and diversionary nationalism. MTR Corporation was denounced as a “foreign multinational [that] wants to send its profits off-shore.”

On the same day that Grigorovitch sent this letter, the RTBU displayed in the Federal Court its real orientation—subordinating train workers to the corporate-government industrial regime responsible for their onerous, profit-driven workplace conditions. Metro Trains management cited the Fair Work laws to seek the banning of aspects of the RTBU’s planned industrial action, including scheduled days when workers would refuse to check tickets and raise station barriers to allow free commuter movement.

In an extraordinary judgment issued on August 9 and published on August 19, Federal Court Justice John Snaden sided with Metro Trains and prohibited all such action. The judge declared that RTBU statements had implied that commuters could travel for free during the industrial action periods. This was “unlawful, illegitimate or unconscionable,” because police still had the power to fine train passengers without valid tickets. Metro Trains, Snaden said, “stood to lose significant sums of revenue in circumstances that would realistically defy precise calculation.”

The judge ordered the RTBU to call off the planned action—specifying that this must include notices via all relevant social media and purchased advertisements in the *Age* and *Herald Sun* newspapers. Any failure to comply would result in union officials being “liable to imprisonment or to sequestration of property or punishment for contempt.”

The RTBU responded with no protest whatsoever. After complying with the court order, ten days later it voluntarily called off the scheduled four-hour strike. Metro Train chief executive Raymond O’Flaherty gloated: “This is a great result for our passengers—and a strong sign that negotiations for a new enterprise agreement are moving in the right direction.”

Now, according to the *Age*: “Negotiators are meeting up to five times a week, with both sides agreeing that bargaining is being done in good faith.” Another sell-out could not be more clearly telegraphed.

Early last year, in neighbouring New South Wales, the union betrayed a struggle of 9,000 rail staff. After enforcing a Fair Work Commission ban on strike action, the RTBU endorsed an agreement involving a wage rise of just 3 percent and numerous “productivity savings,” clearing the way for further pro-business restructuring measures (see: “Australian train workers denounce NSW rail sellout”).

Train workers need to take their fight for decent wages, conditions and job security out of the hands of the RTBU bureaucracy, forming rank and file committees at every station and depot, and uniting in the first instance with tram and other transport workers.

Yarra Tram workers covered by the RTBU are still scheduled to strike between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on August 30, though the union has left no doubt of its hope to call this stoppage off as well. Grigorovitch stated: “Between now and the stoppage, hopefully Yarra Trams will reconsider its hardline position which threatens the long term job security of our members.”

Train and tram workers need to turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions, at the same time fighting the privatisation measures that have wreaked havoc with Melbourne’s increasingly overcrowded and inadequate public transport system for nearly two decades. Such a struggle would win enormous support throughout the working class—while at the same time bringing workers into a frontal conflict

with the state Labor government and its trade union backers.

The author recommends:

Melbourne rail workers vote for strike action
[7 August 2019]

Why the RTBU is muzzling rail workers
[7 February 2018]



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