

Australia: Tram drivers' union attempts to impose sellout agreement

Patrick O'Connor
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Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) officials announced last Friday in Melbourne an “in principle settlement” on a new four-year industrial contract with Yarra Trams, claiming it represented a “huge win” for the workforce.

In reality, the proposed agreement amounts to a sellout deal, drafted through behind closed doors discussions involving the union bureaucracy, Yarra Trams management, and representatives of the Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews. On the most important issue at stake in the dispute—corporate demands for increasing the number of part-time tram workers from 4 to 15 percent of the workforce—the union has capitulated, agreeing to 10 percent total part-timers.

Tram workers ought to vote “no” to the proposed agreement, which undercuts their real wages and conditions.

The “in principle” announcement comes after months of manoeuvring between the RTBU, Yarra Trams, and the Victorian government. The union organised seven limited four-hour shutdowns of Melbourne’s privatised tram system, the world’s largest operational network, in late 2019 and early 2020. The bureaucracy’s strategy centred on isolating the tram drivers from their fellow Metro Trains workers and V/Line regional train drivers—both of which confront the same corporate-government demands for greater workforce “flexibility” in proposed new industrial agreements—and subordinating them to the state government and the Fair Work industrial court regime.

The situation came to a head after the Andrews government intervened on February 20, applying to the Fair Work Commission for a ban on six more four-hour tram strikes planned in March. Transport Minister Melissa Horne declared that the government regarded industrial action that affected the March 15 Grand Prix car race as unacceptable, because this “not only impacts the Victorian economy but is another unnecessary attempt to disrupt passengers during one of the biggest sporting

events on the calendar.”

Horne had earlier endorsed Yarra Trams’ attempt to wrap its wage cutting drive in the colours of identity politics, with management stating that increasing its part-time workforce would boost “diversity” and promote “inclusivity.” The Labor minister declared: “I’m not going to be bullied and intimidated by a handful of middle-aged blokes who are hell-bent on protecting their interests and not allowing part-time women into the workforce.”

The government has repeatedly demonstrated its backing of big business against the tram drivers. Labor Treasurer Tim Pallas—who is currently preparing an anti-working class austerity budget involving \$4 billion in cuts—denounced the drivers last January for striking during Australian Open tennis matches.

Pallas cynically invoked the bushfire crisis as part of a nationalist appeal in support of Yarra Trams management. “I don’t know why you would pick such a period to call such action,” he told the *Age*, “when everybody else is pulling together as a community to try and assist in the recovery efforts that relate to our bushfires and the recovery efforts that relate to our tourism industry.”

In response to the government’s provocative and anti-democratic move to have the Fair Work Commission quash further strike action, the RTBU issued no protest or appeal to tram drivers, transport workers, or the wider working class. Instead, on February 25, it agreed to abandon all planned industrial action and enter into closed doors discussions with Yarra Trams, mediated by the state Labor government.

Last Friday’s sellout announcement is the product of these talks. The union claimed “major improvements” in conditions on the basis of various points such as medical examinations, disciplinary counselling policy, and rostering. The devil may well be in the detail on these issues, however, only a two-page summary of the in principle agreement produced by the RTBU is publicly

available. Tram drivers must demand access to the full agreement, and proper time to collectively discuss it, before any vote is taken.

On the central issues of wages and protection of full-time work protections, there is ample evidence that the RTBU's claim to have "protected existing conditions" is false.

The concession of a 10 percent part-time workforce—more than double the existing proportion—is a massive giveaway that opens the door to even greater casualisation in the future. Yarra Trams—owned by Keolis Downer, a joint corporate venture between Downer Group (annual revenue \$12.6 billion) and French transport giant Keolis (annual revenue \$9.7 billion)—has demanded more part-timers as a key means to slash its wages bill. Under the union's proposed deal, the cap is progressively increased, from 4 percent to 6 percent this year, 8 percent in 2021, and 10 percent from 2022.

Under the subheading "protections," the union claimed that, "Yarra Trams does not intend to increase the 10 percent cap in the EA after this one." This pledge is not worth the paper it is written on—if in fact company management have made anything but a verbal statement to this effect. There is no question that even more extensive demands for workforce casualisation will be issued at the next round of industrial agreement negotiations.

The betrayal on the part-time ratio undercuts all the RTBU's claims about wages. The terms of the proposed agreement include a 14 percent wage increase over 4 years, about the same as cost of living increases, and only marginally higher than Yarra Trams' long-standing offer of 12 percent over the same period.

The part-time provisions, however, will almost certainly slash tram drivers' overtime payments. The RTBU previously explained that Yarra Trams' demand for a 15 percent part-time workforce would mean that full-time drivers would have their annual take-home pay slashed by an average of \$7,000, totalling \$9.69 million in reduced annual wages.

Tram workers ought to demand that the RTBU provide accurate calculations for how much their wages will now be cut as a result of the 10 percent part-time agreement. Unsurprisingly, this information did not form part of the bureaucracy's two-page summary of the "huge win."

Opposition among tram drivers is already evident on social media. On the RTBU Victoria's Facebook page, tram drivers commented on the implications of the part-time concession. "So every couple of years 2 percent.

After 10-20 years all part time," one wrote. Another noted: "Any new drivers now are going to be like the conductors of 20 years ago. Expendable. Just prove me wrong. 1 more EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement] and I'm gone."

Some drivers criticised the union. "More union fees to increase their salaries," one wrote. An authorised officer (AO, ticket inspector) recalled the bureaucracy's rhetoric at a recent public rally: "This union drew a line in the sand, & stated out loud many time[s] NO to anything more than the current 4 percent part time. I was at the meetings, & the Flinders St rally, when our Secretary even used the words Get Fucked to anything more, and you wonder why.... The 4 percent or the 10 percent doesn't affect me as an AO, but I was there to support everyone else and I feel that I've been screwed too."

To fight the RTBU's sellout, and to protect and improve working conditions and wages, all tram workers must insist on their democratic right to be given copies of the full agreement, not union summaries, and adequate time to read and discuss the contents. Mass meetings ought to be convened to allow maximum discussion.

A "no" vote on the proposed agreement needs to be the starting point for a political and industrial counter-offensive, uniting all Yarra Trams, Metro Trains, and V/Line workers in the fight against public transport privatisation and for decent wages and conditions for all workers. This requires taking the struggle out of the hands of the RTBU and building new rank-and-file committees in every depot and station.



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