Australia: Melbourne rail union promotes sellout industrial agreement

Patrick O'Connor
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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced on March 23 that it was endorsing an industrial agreement offer from Metro Trains, the corporate operator of Melbourne's train network. The move is a betrayal of the train workers' protracted industrial dispute, involving major concessions on working conditions that especially affect train drivers.

Furious drivers have taken to the internet and social media to voice their opposition and rally support for a majority "no" vote on the deal.

Melbourne's privatised train network is majority owned by the Hong Kong-based giant MTR Corporation. Negotiations for a new industrial agreement have been underway for more than a year.

At every step, the RTBU has subordinated the train workers to the parameters determined by the company and the Fair Work industrial regime established by the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments, in collaboration with the unions. In two anti-democratic rulings in August and December last year, the Federal Court used Fair Work laws to ban the workers from taking any form of industrial action whatsoever. The RTBU did nothing to defy these orders, instead intensifying their behind closed doors discussions with corporate management (see: "Melbourne train and tram workers isolated by trade unions").

The union bureaucracy has cynically invoked the COVID-19 pandemic to justify the proposed deal. The "global economy and the Australian economy face a crisis" the union wrote, and "against this background of uncertainty," Metro Trains had offered a "very good outcome in very uncertain times."

The proposed agreement includes a 14 percent nominal wage rise over 4 years, far below the initial demand of 6 percent a year. The RTBU claimed to have won a new clause enhancing job security through redeployment and retraining, and other minor improvements in areas such as long service and parental leave.

Left out of all the publicly released agreement "highlights," however, are the enormous workplace concessions to Metro Trains affecting drivers. This includes provisions opening the door for an uncapped part-time workforce, reducing job security and slashing overtime wages. Another concession threatening public safety involves train drivers being forced to repeat the same line three times in a single shift, which studies have shown increases the risk of driver error because of fatigue and reduced alertness.

One especially hated clause of the proposed agreement gives Metro Trains management greater leeway to choose which depot drivers are required to start their shifts. This could substantially increase drivers' commute times, impact on family arrangements, such as school drop-offs, as well as increasing their personal transport expenditures.

The RTBU is engaged in a "divide and rule" strategy, pitting against the train drivers the other Metro Trains workers covered by the agreement, including signallers, authorised officers (ticket inspectors), station staff and administrators.

The sellout of the train drivers has triggered a rift within the RTBU, with the union's Locomotive Division opposed to the deal. The RTBU leadership has accused Locomotive Division officials of "organising online abuse of the Branch Secretary [Luba Grigorovitch]" and "deliberately trying to mislead Members to scare them into rejecting the proposed agreement."

The Locomotive Division has called for a "no" vote, while at the same time insisting that train workers do nothing to challenge the Fair Work industrial regime. In

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a March 26 note to members, the union division wrote: “Because an order of the court was breached the RTBU as a bargaining representative cannot currently organise and engage in protected industrial action in support of claims in bargaining.” It added that “the RTBU and its members are not in a strong bargaining position” because of this.

The RTBU Locomotive Division’s strategy is to return to behind closed doors discussions with Metro Trains management to plea for an agreement that somewhat less aggressively strips workers’ conditions. Their aim, no less than their nominal opponents leading the other divisions of the RTBU, is to suppress widespread anger among workers.

Independently of the internecine dispute within the RTBU bureaucracy, train workers have sought to organise a rejection of the sellout offer.

A “vote no” online petition has been signed by more than 1,500 people. Comments from workers signing the petition include: “Together we stand. With or without the union.” Another: “#VOTENO Our conditions are NOT for sale! You’ve let us down RTBU—you should be bloody ashamed!” And: “I am signing this because the proposed EA [enterprise agreement] wi?l result in an unsafe work environment. The rules and conditions are in place based on lessons learnt from previous mishaps. Let’s not make them occur again.”

Other comments on social media, including the RTBU Victoria’s Facebook page, reflect the train workers’ anger. One wrote: “To use COVID-19 as a scare tactic against your members who are frontline staff is an absolute disgrace!!!! You should be ashamed!! #voteno.” Another driver commented: “I do not want to go down the same line 3 times a day, every day. They could double my pay and I would still say no.”

Many workers directed their anger against the RTBU. One wrote: “You should be ashamed! I am so furious that you are colluding to shoehorn this substandard EA offer through at such a time when front line staff are already experiencing extremely high stress levels over COVID-19. How dare you sell away our conditions?!” Another added: “If Metro get this EA because of the campaign by RTBU Victoria to vote yes, I predict mass resignations from the Loco Division.”

The task confronting Metro Trains workers is to develop a mass “no” vote on the sellout agreement as the starting point for an industrial and political campaign that not only defends all train workers jobs, conditions, and wages, but works to bring Metro Trains and other private transport operators under public ownership with workers’ control.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the irrationality of allowing the private ownership of public transport networks, and operating them on the basis of profit maximisation. Transport workers are courageously risking exposure to the virus in order to maintain train, tram, and bus services that allow numerous health and other essential workers to get to their workplaces.

The corporate operators are meanwhile seeking to slash costs by reducing their services to weekend or public holiday timetables, potentially increasing crowding on the less frequent trains, trams, and buses and increasing the risk of coronavirus transmission.

A campaign for the nationalisation of Metro Trains requires the formation of new rank and file committees in every depot and station, which will take the struggle out of the hands of the RTBU, develop the widest democratic discussion among train workers, and turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks.

This struggle is inseparable from the fight for a workers’ government that would place the major corporations, across industries, and the banks, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

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