

Australia: Hundreds of train drivers in Melbourne quit union to protest sell out

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About six hundred train drivers in Melbourne have quit their membership of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU). The workers are protesting a new industrial agreement that was forced through by the union earlier this year, backed by the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews. The deal has led to deteriorated and unsafe working conditions on the privatised rail network.

The enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) was reportedly approved last April by the RTBU membership, 51 percent in favour against 49 percent opposed. Almost all of the RTBU's train drivers and a large section of its operations rail workers voted "no," reflecting the sell-out agreement's provisions that specifically targeted their working conditions.

For drivers, these included changes to rostering, route runs, training, driver supervision and depot starts. Drivers explained changes from whole-of-network driving to a limited or single line driving would mean major cost savings in terms of wages and training. It would at the same time deskill drivers and through repeated trips on a single line during shifts, decrease driver alertness and increase the frequency of errors and accidents. They explained far more mistakes would be made now as signals are missed and platforms overshot.

One anonymous driver reported in *Rail News* said, "Passengers should be concerned because they are driven by people whose skills are being eroded and they are less engaged on the job ... the variety keeps drivers fresh and avoids complacency."

Another driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "There will be a new timetable introduced at the end of January and that is when the new rosters and repeating the same routes will come in. The big issue is the split of the network, so drivers will only be trained to drive

on half of it rather than all of it.

"Metro has cut the training of new drivers. What happens now is new drivers are allowed to drive on their own and are then brought back for extra training, on things that they didn't learn initially. About 12 to 15 years ago a new driver would get 1,500 hours of accompanied training. Now they get signed on after just 250 hours."

The new regressive measures are aimed at boosting Metro Trains' profits by bringing railway workers' conditions in line with the Hong Kong-based transnational corporation's highly profitable and exploitative overseas operations.

The EBA was pushed through only after the union worked to divide Metro workers, pitting station staff, administrators, and other Metro workers against the train drivers. Another driver told the WSW: "I'm fairly disgusted by what's happening. I'm a staunch unionist; all for one and one for all. The majority are supposed to look after the needs of the minority. But today the unions just care about their own jobs. During the EBA negotiations they told the station staff that the drivers sold them out in the 1980s—that was to split them from us."

The train drivers' mass resignation from the RTBU is a significant development. However, in order to take forward an effective struggle against the regressive new conditions jointly imposed by Metro Trains and the RTBU, rail workers need to reject efforts by a section of the trade union bureaucracy to exploit their anger for its own ends.

Marc Marotta, secretary of the RTBU locomotive division, has indicated he aims to take advantage of new "de-merger" union legislation to split from the RTBU and form a new union representing train drivers. He has previously clashed with RTBU Victorian

Secretary Luba Grigorovitch. In 2016, the two squabbled over control of train drivers union membership fees. Marotta set up a rival bank account for train drivers to deposit their dues, and, after this was blocked, he briefly encouraged rail workers to resign from the RTBU.

During negotiations for the new Metro Trains EBA—involving multiple behind closed doors meetings in 2019–2020 of union officials, company executives, and state government personnel—Marotta and other locomotive division officials complained about not being given a seat at the table.

The dispute between the locomotive division of the RTBU and the senior union leadership involves not a single issue of principle. Neither faction of the union bureaucracy represents the interests of train drivers or any other section of Metro workers. A new, smaller union taking train drivers' dues would, no less than the RTBU has done, subordinate workers to the regressive Fair Work industrial regime, sabotaging unauthorised industrial action and working to deliver on the demands of Metro Trains management.

Grigorovitch is widely despised among train drivers—the former Labor Party staffer is rightly understood to be using her union position as a springboard for a seat in state or federal parliament.

The sell-out agreement imposed by the RTBU, however, is not due to the personal machinations of Grigorovitch or any other individual union official. Rather it is another reflection of the contemporary function of trade unionism. In Australia as around the world, the globalisation of production has meant that unions work not to extract limited reforms improving wages and conditions—instead, union bureaucracies derive their significant privileges by working with corporations and governments to undermine wages, conditions, and jobs.

Metro workers need new organisations of struggle and a new, independent political perspective. Train drivers should form rank-and-file committees on every line and in every depot, with trusted workers elected to lead the fight against the new EBA. These committees must strive to unite all Metro Trains workers, rejecting the divide-and-rule tactics of the RTBU. All Metro workers share a common interest in establishing decent and safe working conditions in every division of the company.

Rank-and-file committees of Metro workers should turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, in the first instance the tram workers who were similarly sold out by the RTBU earlier this year.

This is necessarily a political struggle, requiring unified action in defiance of the antidemocratic Fair Work industrial regime that is enforced by the unions and the state Labor government. As part of a broader struggle a workers' government and a socialist program, the fight should be taken up for the abolition of private ownership of Melbourne's train and tram networks. They should be transformed into publicly-owned and democratically-controlled utilities, operated in the interest of social need, not corporate profit.

This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. We encourage Metro workers to contact us through the *World Socialist Web Site* to develop a discussion on these issues.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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