

Australian tram drivers strike over jobs and conditions

By Margaret Rees
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As about 2,000 Melbourne tram drivers prepared to hold another four-hour stoppage last Thursday, Victorian state Labor Premier Daniel Andrews threatened to take “whatever action we deem appropriate to protect the economic interests of the state.”

Andrews declared that he would not rule out again asking the federal government’s Fair Work Commission (FWC) to ban the stoppage, just as his government did with previous stoppages by tram and train workers over the past fortnight.

At the same time, Andrews revealed concern that any overt intervention by his government could spark wider opposition in the working class to the mounting attacks on jobs and conditions.

“I’m not in the business of inflaming these things,” he said in response to denunciations of the stoppages by the corporate media and the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Andrews indicated that he was relying on the trade union involved, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), to end the stoppages, which he condemned as “unfortunate” and “unnecessary.” The premier urged “everybody involved to sit down, talk through these issues, work through these issues.”

Tram workers stopped work from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Thursday—the second walkout in two weeks—over stalled negotiations for an enterprise agreement (EBA) with their employer, Yarra Trams. Rail workers and drivers, who are employed by Metro Trains, held stoppages over a different EBA a week ago.

The RTBU, which covers both tram and train workers, is currently holding separate negotiations with the transport companies. The union plans to hold four two-hour tram strikes from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. on various lines between September 21 and 24, and impose bans on working overtime and wearing uniforms on selected days.

A Yarra Trams spokesman told the media it would not

seek a FWC order to outlaw last week’s stoppage, saying: “We’ve passed the point of legal action now.” It dispatched 120 buses to replace the trams during the stoppage, and is no doubt in discussions behind the scenes with the Labor government.

By invoking “the economic interests of the state,” Andrews means the profits of Yarra Trams, Metro Trains and the corporate elite in general. Labor has been working closely with the two transport companies to impose their demands on public transport workers.

The RTBU is working accordingly to limit all industrial action while appealing to the employers to make a deal. The union is an unwavering supporter of the Labor Party, having poured resources into its state election campaign last November, claiming that the party represented a “lesser evil” to the Liberals.

Addressing a meeting of over 200 striking tram drivers last Thursday, RTBU tram and bus division state secretary Phil Altieri made no mention of the Labor government or Andrews’ pledge to “protect the economic interests of the state.”

He asserted: “This is not the car industry going broke. This is a huge organisation that made \$50 million profit last year. We’re not talking about an industry in decline. There was 18 percent growth on trams last year. It is more money in their pockets.”

In fact, the global car companies, which are shutting down all assembly operations in Australia, are making massive profits by destroying tens of thousands of jobs, having previously driven up productivity to new levels, with the collaboration of the auto trade unions. The RTBU has long played the same role in public transport.

The union’s wage claim is for an 18 percent rise over four years, which is well below rising the cost of living in Melbourne, the Victorian state capital. Yarra Trams has offered only 13 percent over four years, to be paid for by attacks on hard-won conditions.

The RTBU, which has had 36 meetings with the company since negotiations began, has declared it will call off all industrial action if it can negotiate a deal with the company. Its chief aim is maintain its position at the negotiating table as partners in the employers' assault on wages and conditions.

From the outset, the union has kept tram and rail workers confined within the framework of the FWC and its repressive laws, which restrict any industrial action to enterprise bargaining periods. The Rudd Labor government introduced these laws with the backing of the unions, which use them to strangle any independent action by the working class.

At Thursday's meeting, Altieri sowed illusions in the union's EBA negotiations. He claimed that the company had improved some conditions it was offering. These included bereavement leave of five days, maternity leave increased from 12 to 14 weeks, and paternity leave increased from one to two weeks. Traumatic situations, such as physical assaults by passengers, would entitle a driver to the rest of the day off and two days' leave, subject to counselling. In fact, these changes in Yarra Trams's position were announced two weeks ago.

Altieri admitted that "not all of these conditions have been fixed yet," and the company was still demanding the introduction of harsher rostering arrangements and its right to introduce supplementary labour at any time. The union has told the company that it has no opposition to the use of supplementary labour, as long as the union is consulted.

While train and tram workers in Victoria have demonstrated their determination to defend their conditions, the union is seeking a deal that will deliver the requirements of the government and the companies. In order to prevent defeat, public transport workers have to break out of the union's stranglehold and take control of the struggle through the establishment of genuine democratically-controlled rank and file committees. This requires a turn to workers facing similar attacks, as part of the struggle for a new perspective—the political fight for a workers' government based on a socialist program.

Tram workers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* about their frustration over conditions and pay.

Dave said: "In Europe they are really nailing workers, and they hope to reduce our pay and conditions here. [Yarra Trams] is a wealthy company and they can afford to pay us. We need a decent deal this time.

"As far as the Labor government is behaving, we

wouldn't expect it to do anything different. Public servants' agreements are coming up, so maybe Andrews doesn't want to be seen giving us a fair deal. The ambos' claims [ambulance drivers] are half resolved, but this time they are putting the screws on us."

Jack said: "The CEO went on radio this morning saying that we're earning \$90,000 a year. I've never made that amount. The talks have come to a standstill. The problem with the 14-day roster is that now you get an early shift for a week only, but with a 14-day roster you might have it for two weeks..."

"Patronage has increased by at least 25 percent. Yarra Trams is owned by French company Keolis. They have one of the biggest tram networks in the world. They want more productivity from each worker."

Nigel added: "It is the worst EBA I have known. Older drivers have said to me that conditions were better before. Look at how many extra customers there are. At Camberwell, where I work, the No. 75 trams have to cope with 8,000 extra students at Deakin University. The trams are full, but Yarra Trams won't put more services on. Yet they get a percentage of the fees. It is good for them, but they do nothing to help us. They don't cut the bonuses of the CEO and the managers..."

"As for us earning \$91,000 a year, this is wrong. I only do normal work, I don't do overtime, and last year I made \$62,000 before tax. That is way below the average wage.

Michael, an older worker, said: "There are all sorts of manoeuvres. They seem to want to bring back the old piecework days. They would give you a roster and then set performance benchmarks, say for punctuality and so forth, and then drive up the productivity. I think it is very much a money-oriented company, with very little consideration for the normal working man. We're mere mortals in a sense."

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