

Australia: Melbourne tram drivers take further strike action

By Patrick O'Connor
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More than 1,000 tram drivers and public transport customer service staff went on strike for four hours on September 26, the second industrial stoppage organised by the Yarra Trams workers to protect their conditions and secure a decent wage rise in a new enterprise agreement. A third strike between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. is scheduled for October 10.

The latest industrial action saw hundreds of trams taken off the privatised network that is operated 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).

The corporate giants that run Yarra Trams are attempting to impose a 3 percent nominal annual wage rise, about equivalent to cost-of-living increases, while undermining working conditions through various concessions. The most important of these is the hiking of a cap on the hiring of part-time tram drivers, currently set at 4 percent of the current workforce. Yarra Trams initially demanded this be raised to 35 percent, before dropping it to 15 percent.

Borrowing from the lexicon of identity politics, corporate chiefs have claimed that increasing the proportion of part-timers will boost “diversity” and promote “inclusivity” by allowing a wider range of people to work as tram drivers. In reality, the transparent aim is to boost profits—exploiting part-time workers on short shifts as a means of slashing overtime and penalties paid to full-time workers. The purpose is to lower the total wages bill.

One tram driver, with 16 years’ experience, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “The big clanger is a mass part-time workforce—it will erode safety standards and impact on family life,” he explained. “In my opinion, we [the workers] want to put safety before money, the

company wants to put money before safety. We already have 4- to 5-minute turnarounds [between routes]—that’s not long enough to get a drink or go to the toilet. This is about safety. We need effective response times if a security issue comes up; we need more customer service staff to usher passengers on the trams at busy times.”

The driver also spoke of the pressures being exerted by management: “The company has put through a new roster as a subtle threat. Shifts start at 7 a.m. and finish at 7 p.m., you don’t get home until 8 p.m., and then you have to start again the next morning. What they are saying is if you don’t agree with the part-time arrangements, this is the roster you’ll be lumped with.”

Tram drivers, members of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), have twice overwhelmingly voted down company offers for a new enterprise agreement. The union has proposed maintaining the current part-time cap and annual wage rises of 6 percent. However, while the workers have demonstrated their determination to fight to protect their wages and conditions, the union bureaucracy has worked to isolate the tram drivers and subordinate them to the anti-democratic Fair Work industrial legislation imposed by the former federal Labor government.

RTBU members working for Metro Trains are also currently negotiating a new enterprise agreement, yet the union has blocked a united fight by tram and train drivers. In late August, the RTBU called off a planned four-hour strike of train drivers, which had been scheduled for August 27, on the basis of purported “progress” in their closed-door discussions with Metro Trains management on a new four-year enterprise agreement.

The union has provided train drivers with no evidence of any progress. Metro Trains, majority

owned by Hong Kong-based giant MTR Corporation (annual revenue \$10 billion), is continuing with its aggressive strategy of threatening workers with docked pay for even minimal industrial action, and of seeking legal injunctions blocking all strikes and stoppages. Like Yarra Trams, Metro Trains is demanding the sweeping casualisation of its workforce.

Rather than mobilising workers against the corporate provocations, the RTBU is appealing to the courts for permission to proceed with token industrial action. The union last month lodged a Federal Court application, “to clear away the uncertainty about whether we can take protected industrial action.” The hearing began September 19 before being adjourned to October 14 for a three-day hearing.

RTBU Victorian branch secretary Luba Grigorovitch has appealed to the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews to intervene into the tram and train drivers’ disputes. After the government repeatedly insisted that the enterprise negotiations were a matter for the union and Yarra Trams and Metro Trains, Grigorovitch, herself a former Labor Party parliamentary staffer and aspiring parliamentarian, complained that Minister for Public Transport Melissa Horne was “asleep at the wheel” and “out of her depth.”

The union chief has called on the government to intervene and broker an agreement, as it did in 2015. Tram and train drivers need to take this appeal as a serious warning. Four years ago, the state Labor government stepped in and banned all industrial action before imposing a deal that involved a minimal wage rise and that resolved none of the onerous workload and rostering issues that workers are now seeking to resolve.

A new agreement worked out by the RTBU, the Labor government and the train and tram networks’ corporate operators threatens major concessions on workers’ job security, workplace conditions and wages.

The union bureaucracy’s manoeuvres have been backed by the pseudo-left organisations in Melbourne, which are complicit in their silence on the train and tram drivers’ fight. The Victorian Socialists, an electoral front of Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, ran three candidates in last May’s federal election, one of whom, Kath Larkin, was billed as an

RTBU delegate and militant. Despite this, Victorian Socialists have said and done nothing aside from an August 19 Facebook post that declared its “full support” for the union’s industrial campaign, adding that “We really need the Rail Tram and Bus Union to win.”

Tram and train drivers need to take their fight out of the hands of the RTBU bureaucracy, forming rank-and-file committees in every depot and station to develop the maximum unity of all transport workers against the predatory demands of the transnational corporations that are seeking ever greater profits from the privatisation of the public transport system. Mass meetings should be organised to allow the fullest democratic discussion among the rank and file on how to take the campaign forward.

Transport workers need to turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks on their jobs, wages, and conditions. Yarra Trams and Metro Trains workers are locked in a political struggle with the state Labor government, which functions as an instrument of big business and finance capital. Their fight is inseparable from a campaign to reverse the privatisation of the train and tram networks, which has subordinated the vital provision of public transportation to the accumulation of corporate profit.

The author recommends:

Train workers’ union calls off Melbourne strike
[23 August 2019]

Australia: Why the RTBU is muzzling railworkers
[7 February 2018]

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