

Australian rail union imposes sell out agreement after 51-49 percent split vote

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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) last month announced that a new industrial agreement covering Metro Trains workers in Melbourne had been approved by 51 percent of union members, just ahead of the 49 percent who voted “no.”

The ratified agreement will tear up important workplace conditions for Metro Trains workers, especially train drivers. Many outraged rail workers have quit the RTBU in protest over the bureaucracy’s imposition of far reaching concessions on behalf of Metro Trains, which operates Melbourne’s privatised train network and is majority owned by the Hong Kong-based giant MTR Corporation.

Metro executive Raymond O’Flaherty gloated over the ratified agreement. He noted that the nominal wage rise of 14 percent over 4 years had been “balanced” by “improvements in the way we work to deliver the network needed for a growing Melbourne.” In other words, productivity concessions at workers’ expense.

RTBU giveaways include loosening restrictions on train drivers repeatedly driving back and forth along single rail lines. Previous restrictions aimed at minimising rail worker fatigue and enhancing alertness. Now drivers will be asked to repeat the same line three times in a single shift, thereby jeopardising public safety.

Another concession allows Metro Trains management the “flexibility” to order drivers to start their shifts at different stations. This will substantially increase drivers’ commute times, impact on family arrangements, such as school drop-offs, as well as increasing their personal transport expenditures.

One train driver spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the implications of the new agreement. “The main concession I oppose is the number of runs on one line,” he said. “It got put down years ago, before I

started, that we could do a maximum of one run on a line, except for our home line where we could do two runs, because it stops driver complacency. Now its gone up to three runs on the same line, which, aside from the major risk that is introduced, just removes any job satisfaction. We’ll have drivers at Sandringham doing three Sandringhams [lines], all day every day, or three Frankstons. Under the EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement], I could be doing this four days in a row.”

The driver added: “Metro can now fit extra work in, increasing productivity. For drivers the agreement means more work, and longer commute times. You could potentially have a driver in Newport [a western Melbourne suburb] having to sign on in Craigieburn [an outer northern suburb], for instance, which is an extra 25 kilometres as the crow flies, but considering the roads and peak hour traffic, it might mean an extra half hour or more of travel time. In this EBA they’ve accepted a couple of starting locations, but now that this been agreed to, there’s no way we can in good faith prevent them from extending that in future EBAs.”

The RTBU narrowly rammed through the regressive agreement by pitting train drivers against other Metro Trains workers, including station staff, ticket inspectors and administration staff. This divide and rule strategy involved union officials being welcomed by management into stations and depots—train drivers told the WSWs that usual site access restrictions appear to have been waived—to give lengthy presentations arguing for a “yes” vote. Train drivers opposing the deal were portrayed as being greedy and selfish.

A significant aspect of the union’s campaign against the workers was its exploitation of the coronavirus crisis. The bureaucracy declared that given the “global economy and the Australian economy face a crisis,”

Metro Trains had offered a “very good outcome in very uncertain times.”

A train driver told the WSWS: “The lows that the [RTBU] state branch have sunk to are amazing. They don’t care about the coronavirus.”

Public transport workers internationally have been among the most vulnerable layers of the working class in countries and regions where COVID-19 is most prevalent (see: “Transit agencies and governments continue to expose workers and riders to coronavirus pandemic internationally”).

Asked about safety provisions put in place for Metro Trains workers, the train driver laughed derisively. “We’ve only now finally been given wipes to wash down the dash, sanitiser, and gloves,” he explained. “That is basically the extent of it. The issue has been raised that the air-conditioning units should be fitted with HEPA filters, because the air from the saloon goes straight into the cabin. As soon as someone sprays some perfume in the saloon we get a face full of it. And yet they’re saying, no, the advice they’ve received is that the air-conditioning units remove moisture from the air and so therefore it should— *should*, they won’t say outright that it does—remove the virus.”

Both the threat posed by COVID-19 and the industrial agreement sell-out pose the need for train drivers to organise independently of the trade unions. This has now emerged as a life and death necessity.

Action committees should be formed in every station and depot, with the widest democratic discussion developed on the measures required to firstly protect the health and safety of all train workers, and to develop a struggle against the workplace concessions enforced by the RTBU on behalf of corporate management.

The widest unity needs to be established with other sections of workers confronting similar threats to their safety and their working conditions, in the first instance with tram workers, who were similarly sold out by the RTBU in a recent industrial agreement. This is necessarily a political struggle, requiring action in defiance of the antidemocratic Fair Work industrial regime that is enforced by the unions and the state Labor government, and a fight for the abolition of private ownership of Melbourne’s train and tram networks, making them instead publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities, operated in the

interest of social need not corporate profit.



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