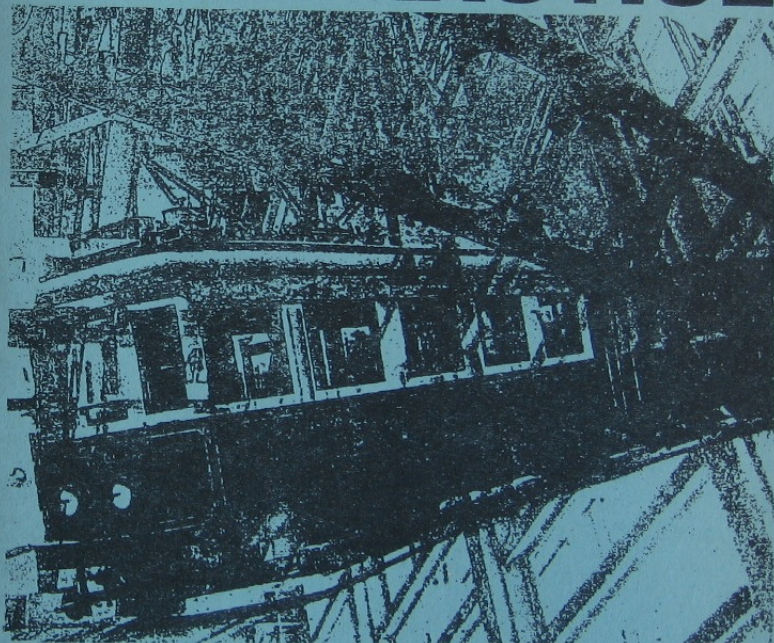


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Melbourne Tram Dispute and Lockout

January-February 1990

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SYDNEY
1997

anarcho syndicalism in practice

MELBOURNE TRAMWAYS DISPUTE & LOCKOUT

Melbourne Tramways Dispute and Lockout

Dick Curlewis

Rebel Worker Vol 10 No 2 (79) March 1991

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Dick Curlewis

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Editor's Preface

The Tramways Dispute and Lockout in Melbourne, during January and February 1990, represents an important watershed in the resurgence of anarcho-syndicalism in Australia. It expressed great potential in checking the employer offensive and the associated push toward privatisation of public sector industry.

The tramworkers (trammies) resistance to the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Cain Government in Victoria took many direct action and workers control forms associated with the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, such as the historic workers control action on January 1 (trams were driven to the centre of the city where they stayed for the entire dispute), the subsequent Depot occupations and the famous wildcat pickets, or the picket by trammies and supporters on February 2 at the Jolimont Railyards which disrupted of Melbourne's morning peak hour train services.

Another significant feature of the dispute was the emergence of Passenger Support Groups, initiated by the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation, which played a crucial role in the strike. They supplied the trammies with funds and food, and assisted on pickets and precluded the sabotage by the Australian Tram and Motor Omnibus Employees Association (ATMOEA) officials, who failed to pass on funds from the Official Lockout Fund to trammies during the dispute, and engaged in behind-the-scenes negotiations with the Government.

A vital contribution to the dynamic syndicalist features of the trammies resistance to the removal of conductors was the militant climate created by the magazine *Sparks*, and its associated group of public transport militants in Melbourne, during the years immediately prior to the dispute.

Despite the militant trammies being forced back to work, due to the manipulation of the tram union officials and the impact of the hardships of the lockout, the Government's attempt to remove conductors from trams and institute Driver-Only-Operation, and introduce MET Scratch Tickets (Public transport tickets which could be purchased from retail outlets), was frustrated.

The demoralising impact of the trammies return to work and the failure of syndicalist workplace structures (eg depot committees) to crystallise at the Depots contributed to a resurgence of tram union official influence. Significant oversights such as the dissolution of the Passenger Support Groups, neglect of industrial strategy by ASF comrades, and the subsequent subtle union busting strategies deployed by management, which allowed the ATMOEA officials to engineer subsequent sellouts, and hose-down resistance by the workforce.

Despite the momentous aspects of this working class struggle, there has been an intriguing and disturbing absence of interest by labour historians and leftist groups in discussing these events. We have published this pamphlet to remedy this neglect, and assist the rebuilding of anarcho-syndicalist presence, and renewed militancy, amongst trammies (especially in the wake of the Kennett Liberal Government's threat of rapid privatisation of public transport infrastructure), other transport workers and workers generally.

Mark McGuire

MELBOURNE TRAMWAYS DISPUTE AND LOCKOUT

Dick Curlewis

In writing this history of the Tram Dispute, with the help of others, I want to thank the tram workers of Brunswick Tram Depot for enabling me to witness tram workers making their own history. I can be criticised for not involving more tram workers in this account of their experiences, but if you think the story is defective in other ways, please let us know.

THE JANUARY 1990 TRAMWAY LOCKOUT

This is a report of that dispute as it took place from the Brunswick Tram Depot and how it developed. What was interesting was the way the rank and file trammies, who stayed in the Depot during January, worked together. People of diverse backgrounds (birth-place, culture, language) did find common ground, a common enemy in a dictatorial management.

It has to be said, however, a number disappeared and only turned up again when the dispute ended. Those who stayed, some 100 or so, were convinced of what they had done. This helped to break down barriers between the delegate and the rank and file that are all too common in trade unions today.

Of course, the other important factor was the relation between the Depot workers and the members of the Brunswick Passenger Support Group who played an acknowledged important role in their struggle. Those barriers, between the users of the trams and those who make them function, began to be broken down. But, it has to be said, of course, that there were some disagreements in the course of the lockout in the Depot because the workers were not only angry at how the bosses had treated them, but because they had done something that was unique in any industrial dispute. It was inevitable that that anger sometimes spilled over and became hard to control. Despite that, the delegates and members at the Depot did, at least during the dispute, stick together very well—they knew what was needed. That should never be forgotten.

SKIRMISHES

All this did not happen overnight. Members of the tram union took part in many different actions which took place during 1988 and '89.

In August 1988, South Melbourne tram depot members held a protest march to the opening of the MET Shop (a retail outlet owned by the Melbourne Metropolitan Public Transport Authority, a section of the Public Transport Corporation) in Elizabeth Street in the City. The MET Shop was staffed by non-ATMOEA members who sold Scratch Tickets ("scratchies") from December 1. South Melbourne also formed a Save the Conductors Committee to organise for the coming struggle as Transport Minister Kennan announced that connies would be taken off trams from January 1, 1990. Meanwhile, the union officials were all squabbling for power in the November ATMOEA elections. The sitting Union Secretary, Harper, was ousted by the Progressive Team led by the current Secretary,

Lou Di Gregorio, a former Essendon Depot delegate. The Progressive Team push built up members expectations that, if elected, they would save the conductors.

The centrally controlled Save the Conductors Co-ordinating Committee was set up by the officials, meeting at the union headquarters in King Street.

Again, centrally organised activity, like non-collection of fares, non-uniform day, stop-work rallies outside Parliament in the non-peak (10am-2pm), marches on the MET headquarters in Market St and Transport House in Collins Street (Kennan's headquarters), attempts to occupy the Office of the Public Transport Corporation Chief, Fitzmaurice, ALP State headquarters in Lygon Street, Carlton, and the disruption of the State ALP Conference, were ordered by Union officials after a mass meeting at Collingwood Town Hall, in September, handed authority to run the dispute to them.

Alternative proposals, like all out strikes to hit the Christmas shopping spree, were discouraged by the officials in favour of getting "community support". A determination to resist the Government's policy of restructuring the industry with the threat of cutting staff, first conductors and then railways assistants, was building.

CONTRACT CONDUCTORS

But, it has to be said that some Depots were beginning to be critical of the lack of positive direction in the stop-work demonstrations. So, Essendon and Brunswick Depots, under official supervision, had their own joint action to put their demands before the public and other Depots, eg. stop works without notice.

An answer to the lack of direction in the campaign was supplied by the MET itself. First, trams were taken to the Preston Workshops to be converted for Driver-Only-Operation. Bans on the work saw the PTC hire private contractors to do the shoddy work. A picket-line, and sabotage, stopped the converted trams moving. The "new doors" were lost at any Depot where they showed up.

Secondly, an attempt was made to bring contract conductors into the industry. The attempt was defeated by the Depots refusing to work with the contract connies, and trainers resigned from that role. The contract connies, though paid by the MET, never saw the inside of a passenger-filled tram.

JANUARY 1, 1990: THE ERUPTION

On the first day of the new year, the MET attempted the bureaucratic tactic of demanding that tram workers agree to the following condition: *You are required to sign that you have worked, during your shift, as instructed.* Workers were expected to sign every day! Like all bureaucracies, the MET did not think about how the tram workers would react. It had the effect of bringing the whole dispute up front. It convinced Union members that drastic action was needed to bring the Government, and the MET, to their senses. Only two members signed the contract at the Brunswick Depot. For their collaboration, they were banned as scabs and now work in MET Shops and are members of the Municipal Officers Association (MOA). Later, stand-down notices were delivered to homes, via private couriers (postal workers were too "unreliable"). The majority were not going to meekly accept the MET plan, direct action was their answer. If the boss attacks, fight 'em back, face to face, order-givers versus order-takers.

On Monday, January 1, Brunswick, Essendon, Kew, North Fitzroy, Preston, and South Melbourne Depots were occupied, and for that day, the workers ran the trams themselves. At Brunswick, a banner placed for all to see on Sydney Road outside the Depot said: *THIS DEPOT UNDER WORKERS CONTROL.*

The MET had again underestimated how the tram workers would react. They clearly hoped the majority would back off. When the MET decided, late on Monday night, to cut off the power to the entire tramway system, the information was relayed on evening radio and TV. The trammies again escalated the dispute, and took trams into the City to blockade and, if possible, run the trams from there. The dispute was now full square before the public of Melbourne. Those trams stood there for the whole of January, to the dismay of the bosses in Government and the MET. They were not able then to hide the dispute behind "consultations", as often occurs in industrial disputes.

LOOK MA, NO MANAGEMENT

The next day, the Brunswick Depot effectively blockaded any attempt by management and the MET to evict them, with possible police support, by staying in the building.

The tram workers, inside their Depot, began organising the campaign with rosters to do the jobs needed. On that day, the workers met and agreed to the following resolution:

"We, the members of Brunswick, totally oppose the State Government's decision to shut down the Public Transport system and to attempt to lock members out of their depots. We add that even in the event of the circumstances of a resumption of service becoming possible, we will only return to work on the condition that the Government agrees that conductors will remain on all trams on a permanent basis and that they be issued with the old-style tickets. We reject any notion of compromise on these issues. We declare that our occupation of Brunswick Depot will continue until our demands are met."

The fight was really on.

Also, on Tuesday February 2, another important development was the decision taken by a group of people meeting in a Melbourne squat. Sue recounts how the Brunswick Passenger Support Group was formed:

"...on the evening of January 2, half a dozen people sitting around came up with the idea of setting up support groups, and decided to set about organising them at the two nearest depots, South Melbourne and Brunswick. The delegates were contacted about the idea and both gave the go-ahead. The word spread and on January 3, the first meetings of the Support Groups were held.

I was a member of the Brunswick Passenger Support Group, so I'll use that as my example. The Support Groups turned out to be the element that gave the trammies their strength. Knowing that the community supported them, and had, in fact, involved themselves in the daily life of the lock-out, seemed to provide the trammies with their best reason for not backing down. They were not only fighting for themselves but also for others. This was stated time and again.

The two Depots where we were able to set up durable support groups, Brunswick and Preston, formed the basis of the resistance to the union sell-out. In these Depots, Support Group members were able to participate in all Depot activities, and often to observe and to speak at Depot meetings. It was this inclusion in the decision making process that was particularly significant given that this was in blatant contradiction to "the rules" tradition of ATMOEA meetings, and against the wishes of the Union's officials. It demonstrates the degree of union between the Depots and the Support Groups.

The Brunswick Passengers Support Group was composed of members of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation, some International Socialists and other individuals who came into the Depot, like Nick and Mick who both gave great support during January. The other Left groups were noticeably absent. I will always remember how the Socialist Labour League, now known as the Socialist Equality Party, reacted to the struggle; giving lectures to the depot workers about how their leaders were acting, but never helping out until, eventually, they were driven from the Brunswick Depot.

Of course, the trammies had worked out, themselves, about how their leaders had betrayed them; they didn't need to be lectured.

The Brunswick Support Group went into action on the Thursday; \$150 was raised in Sydney Road, plus food was donated. At the end of the dispute, over \$4,000 was raised as well as a vast lot of food and drink—even pet food for workers' animals was donated. Collections were made both by Support Group members and the tram workers, often together. Publicity, in support of the dispute, was distributed up and down the streets of Brunswick. Some of the money and food was distributed to other Depots, as was experience to help evict managers and take over. Once the word got around, local restaurants began to supply the Depot with evening meals—tram workers and supporters never went hungry during the dispute.

The militant workers and their supporters at the Brunswick Depot saw their job helping other Depots with physical support to strengthen the occupations of the tram depots. Because of this overwhelming support from the locals, it was decided to put on a demonstration up Sydney Road, with a banner: *SYDNEY ROAD TRADERS, THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!*

In those early days, it was obvious that Brunswick Depot was seen as the real centre of the campaign. Known on the radio link-up as the "Brickhouse", it was indeed a fort, held by determined-to-win workers. People came from other Tram Depots, and the community began to join in. The solidarity was great. Two members of the Air Pilots Federation spoke about their dispute. (The Federation was smashed following an industrial campaign to win a wage rise outside of the framework of the Wages Accord, an agreement between the Federal ALP Government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)). Videos, and speakers, about other battles that had raged were put on: a railway guard talked about their victory, hard won. *Rocking the Foundations* about the building industry and the Nurses film *Running out of Patience* were shown. After the showing, the following slogan was put up in the depot: *Nurses went 50 days and won, sort of, can we do any less? "United We Stand, Divided We Fall (Old Union Motto)"*.

The attempt by the Government to get the tram workers back to work was rejected at a meeting at the Brunswick Town Hall on January 19.

Then, to make sure that there was no misunderstanding as to where he stood in the campaign, the Secretary, made this statement:

A MESSAGE FROM LOU DI GREGORIO

Tramways workers will not be stood over and intimidated by Cain and Kennan.

The union movement and the community stand with us in our opposition to the unjust and unpopular MET Ticket system and the removal of tram conductors.

I challenge the Cain Government to establish a Royal Commission into the millions of dollars wasted on the failure called the MET ticket.

Cain Government must stop bashing workers to cover up the incompetence of the Minister of Transport.

Signed: Lou Di Gregorio

BACKDOWN AND BETRAYAL

Secret meetings, between ALP people and the acting Federal President of the ATMOEA, at which the Victorian State Secretary was present, were held beginning on the evening of the January 19. Eventually, on the Monday, January 22, the deal, which had been rejected by the mass meeting of ATMOEA members at Brunswick Town Hall on January 19, was signed by the acting Federal President. The State Secretary was present but did not sign. It appears to me that the acting President was only a front in the plot to change the direction of the dispute against the wishes of the rank and file. By January 24, the rest of the Union Executive realised something was afoot, but to no avail, as they were presented with a *fait accompli*.

On Thursday afternoon, January 25, the Brunswick Depot delegates decided, to their credit, where their loyalties stood; to their members at the Depot, not to the Executive which had given in.

The members were called to a special meeting at the Depot that evening. Again, the rank and file escalated the dispute, and in doing so, in my opinion, made history that night.

The Brunswick Tram Depot workers had their revolution because what happened had no precedent in recent industrial disputes, and because the decision was taken by the rank and file and their delegates at an open, democratic meeting that lasted four and a half hours. This was the resolution agreed to by a vote of 109 to 1, at 2.30am on Friday morning:

"We, the members of Brunswick, are disgusted with the Executive's decision to agree to discuss Driver-Only-Operation.

Brunswick again reaffirms its position that we only agree to Two-Person-Operation and this Depot will not return to work regardless on the Executive's decision.

The membership of Brunswick are now, more than ever, more determined to fight this dispute to the bitter end with everything we have.

Furthermore, deputations be set up to visit other depots to get their support in approaching our fellow members in the Bus and Non-Traffic Division to support us by stopping work indefinitely until this dispute is won."

BRUNSWICK DECIDES TO RUN THE DISPUTE THEMSELVES

With the help of the Preston Depot, Brunswick sprang into action as the following decisions show: *"We members of the ATMOEA rank and file resolve to continue workplace visits and gathering support from other rank and file members and workers in all industries. We resolve that a co-ordinating group of rank and file members be formed at this meeting (28/1/90) to organise the workplace visits."*

Individuals and groups from other Depots, who wanted to fight on, came to the meeting. At all the actions of that last week, members of the executive or officials were always there attempting to frustrate the action of the Depot.

The two Depots realised it was crucial to get support from other Depots. Pickets were sent to North Fitzroy and Footscray. They certainly stirred things up, but it was an uphill struggle—the backoff of the Executive had affected the morale in most other Depots.

One reason for the lack of fight was the lack of financial support. Both the Government's tactics and, unfortunately, I believe, that of the Executive was to starve the tram workers back to work. So Brunswick responded with the demand: *"We the members of the ATMOEA call on the executive to sell the Tramways House and also to immediately release the investment account funds (over \$300,000) for the members of this union and a full statement of all Union finances be made available."*

A last minute escalation was planned with two railway rank and filers—the picket of the Jolimont Rail Yards. This really caused the Secretary to attack the picketers as a "lot of ratbags". But, train services that morning were brought almost to a standstill when rail-workers refused to cross picketlines. Further, the Industrial Relations Commission, where the Union officials and Trades Hall Boss, John Halfpenny, were meeting the MET and the Government, and ATMOEA headquarters, in King Street, were picketed.

Jock Balfour, a Federal ATMOEA official from Tasmania, signed—"only as a witness" was the pacifying justification to angry trammies by Victorian officials—the 33 point document to accept Driver-Only-Operation while meeting secretly with Kennan. Though they had fought back magnificently, it was obvious to Brunswick Depot that the majority of tram workers had been demoralised by the dirty work of the Union Executive.

Yet, they did not give in. With the mass meeting postponed to Friday, February 3, the Depot still sent out messages to the other tram workers. On the Thursday night, some at the Brunswick Depot were of the opinion that they should ignore the decision of what they regarded as a bogus mass meeting on the Friday; the bus workers who had scabbed on their struggle were being rallied to the meeting by the Executive.

Members of the Brunswick and Preston tram Depots marched down Sydney Road to that meeting to fight to the bitter end. What happened is history now; the bureaucrats had to take refuge from the anger and bitterness they could not control.

And so they came back from the Brunswick Town Hall, drenched by the rain and tired. My connie friend, Monica expressed it so well, standing there amongst her mates, determined to fight on in another ways. I will never forget that afternoon at the Depot, just as I will always remember that magnificent struggle on January 25 and 26; and later when officials were banned from speaking by the rank and file.

If more solidarity had come from elsewhere in the industry, and outside, the Depot workers would have won. But, for all that, they did fight well in their unfinished revolution, and conductors are still on Melbourne trams.



WORKERS CONTROL IN ACTION: Sth Melb. Depot trammies writing out time table cards for free tram service on January 1st. 1990

BRUNSWICK DEPOT: A REVIEW OF THE TRAMSWAYS DISPUTE

Dick Curlewis

In this article, I accept the challenge of my friends to look again at the story of the Brunswick Tram Depot in the Tramways Dispute and Lockout of 1990 when they took the dispute out of the hands of "their" (sic) Union Executive, and decided to run it themselves against the ALP Cain Government and the MET. I have also tried to re-evaluate developments after the dispute ended.

The experience of the Brunswick Tram Depot dispute turned out to be a watershed in my political experience, and confirmed my syndicalism—the rank and file, if brought to the centre of the stage in a class struggle, can generate confidence and actively contribute to the reshaping of society. As a member of the Brunswick Passenger Support Group (I was the Treasurer), I was able to participate in the meetings at the depot. I saw the tram workers, collectively, play the leading role in the dispute; the memory has been reinforced by viewing videotape made by Sue Russell and other members of the Support Group in the Depot during the dispute.

These tapes record some of the great moments in the dispute; the march down Sydney Rd on January 19 chanting "Connies jobs not for sale", the meeting in the Brunswick Town Hall, rejecting the Government's demands, and the climax of the dispute, the five and a half hour meeting from 10pm to 3.30 am on January 24 and 25 after the backdown of the ATMOEA Victorian Secretary.

Rank and file tram workers, from Brunswick and Preston Depots, took over the dispute. The resolution from that meeting is in my history. Then, the escalation with pickets to North Fitzroy and Footscray Depots and, finally, the picket at Jolimont Rail Yards which aimed to take the dispute into the railways, with the possibility of moving to a real rank and file general strike. They had the support of the rank and file committee in the railways:

"31/1/90: This meeting of Australian Railways Union (ARU) delegates in line with resolutions endorsed by Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) Public Sector delegates, station, maintenance and operations members, supports the placing of pickets at any PTC location by members of PTC Unions, particularly ATMOEA rank and file picketing at Jolimont Yard in support of retention of tram conductors. Moved V.Moore, Seconded G.Walters, Carried unanimously."

Then, to the final meeting on February 2, to see the Brunswick and Preston tram workers fighting to the end, showing their anger and bitterness toward the leadership.

I have recorded four of the protest speeches on cassette tape. This industrial dispute was unique in recent working class history, until the Richmond Secondary College campaign. But, there is a significant difference; the Brunswick workers had taken over the Depot, driven the manager out and, in the last weeks, were fighting the campaign themselves with the help of the Preston Depot and other trammies. They did not allow "their" (sic)

Union officials to speak at meetings, and denied them any influence in their decision making

The role of the Brunswick Passenger Support Group, which became involved on day three of the dispute and was able to meet in the Depot alongside the workers, turned out to be a vital factor in the dispute. I will always remember on day four after Support Group members and trammies had been down Sydney Road for about an hour and came back with \$150 and donations of food from the market. The trammies saw that they were not fighting on their own. The support continued right to the end, attending the meetings and going to the pickets. The issues of the dispute, the conductors' jobs, the forced contract and the scab MET Tickets, were taken to the community with leaflets, the daily collection of money and food by Support Group members, tram workers organising together and the street demonstrations. The result was as Sue says in the earlier essay: "We became part of the Depot collective."

"From 1/1/90, the introduction of the MET Ticket results in ticket changes across the Transport System. As an employee you have been provided with self-training information and instructions on these specific changes relevant to your job. All employees are legally required to fully carry out duties as directed in accordance with the changes detailed through Depot management. For example, conductors on trams or bus drivers are now required to sell only Emergency Tickets and to check validity of tickets of all travellers on the tram/bus. An Emergency Ticket is to be purchased if a traveller is without a ticket or does not have a valid ticket. Accordingly, you are now required to endorse that you will sell and check tickets only in accordance with instructions and acknowledge that "no work as directed, no pay," and possible disciplinary action shall apply if such duties are not fully carried out. Authorised by PTC Chief Executive 29/12/89"

The importance of our support was acknowledged by the tram workers themselves. I will always remember the delegate saying to us: "It was your support that gave us our strength."

So now to answer my challenge; why did the tram workers give up the struggle? And it was a great struggle. The videotape depicts that very clearly, that aspect cannot be disputed.

An understanding of the role of the Victorian Secretary of the ATMOEA is important here. Let me explain, it was a conspiratorial role. The meeting on January 19 had rejected the Government's 33 point plan and confirmed ATMOEA policy. Conductors must be on every tram at all times, for reasons of passengers safety and service. This stand had been confirmed by a message from the State Secretary at the time:

"Tramway workers will not be stood over and intimidated by Cain and Kennan. The union movement and the community stand with us in our opposition to the unjust and unpopular MET Ticket system and the removal of tram conductors. I challenge the Cain Government to establish a Royal Commission into the millions of dollars wasted on the failure called the MET Ticket. The Cain Government must stop bashing workers to cover up the incompetence of the Minister of Transport."

Signed Lou Di Gregorio.

After that, the conspiracy came into action. The State Secretary was meeting some ALP people and the acting Federal President of the union to change the direction of the dispute against the wishes of the rank and file expressed in the decision of January 19. (I was shown diary entries of these meetings.) On January 22 or 23, the Executive of the Victorian Branch was presented with a *fait accompli* - the acting Federal President had signed the 33 point agreement with the Government

A week after this betrayal a meeting at the Brunswick Town Hall, on February 2, the 33 point agreement was ratified. The ATMOEA accepted the introduction of the MET Tickets, Driver-Only-Operation of modern trams and the agreed to the conversion of trams to Driver-Only-Operation. The rebel Depots, opposed to the ATMOEA officials replied:

"It is union policy not to accept MET Tickets and Driver-Only-Operation. We do not support nor accept the conversion of trams."

What did the Secretary and the Executive, with two exceptions, act in this way? I have watched and listened to taped of the Secretary's speech at the mass meeting on February 2. He says this in his report:

"Two weeks ago we made a decision to go on and fight. I supported that decision, but then the circumstances changed. On that day we were fighting the Government and I was prepared to lead the membership and fight because I could see we could win the battle; but, last week, we were summoned to go before Commissioner Nolan of the Arbitration Court. The campaign situation changed. The PTC applied for the Full Bench of the Industrial Relations Commission. Then the Full Bench referred the case back to Commissioner Nolan, with the instruction to solve the problem or we will solve it for you! If you don't appear, then they will send the police against you (an interjection about Clarrie O'Shea here) I had to attend."

During the Assistant Secretary's report, a tram worker challenged point one in the package before the meeting; acceptance of Driver-Only-Operation. That rebel tram worker demanded the meeting to vote on the question, immediately. The chairman refused; the whole package was to be voted on at the end of the meeting. It was obvious from the meeting that this question was important to the members and the leadership were in a spot of trouble. At this point, the sharp division in the meeting came to the fore; those who opposed the sellout, as they claimed with angry boos and paper missiles, and those who supported what the Executive was doing with appropriate applause. In this group were the large number of ATMOEA bus workers.

In his speech, the Secretary claimed that the tram workers could not now win. What he was now doing was to get the best benefit for tram workers. I think here, we should remember what happened in the few days after the January 19 meeting; about his loyalty to the members of the union. To continue the fight, as the rebel Depots wanted, and their escalation of the dispute to other depots and, finally, to the Jolimont Rail Yards really angered the Secretary; "a lot of ratbags" he called them.

But, you still have to ask why the tram workers went back to their old ways? It seemed for a moment that the position had changed for the better. There were many factors. I remember, when members of Brunswick and Preston Depots returned to the Brunswick Depot after the meeting on the February 2, Michelle standing up and stating that the fight would continue in other ways though she has forgotten this now. The Brunswick Support Group tried to have a meeting in the Depot, without the help of the delegate, but was asked to leave by the re-instated management.

On Saturday, February 3 when a combined meeting of members —those who had fought the great fight and those who had left the Depot on January 2— the delegates found the position beyond their control; the great unity of the Depot collapsed. The returning members wanted to be back on the rosters as if nothing had happened. I was there at that meeting, and saw the anger of my Depot friends.

The role and experience of the Support Group was new. We had never discussed how to react to this situation; the collective fighting situation of the Depot was broken. We went back to our normal life. I wanted to continue the association with the tram workers. Some of them have questioned me: "Where is the Support Group?" In my opinion, we had walked away from them.

What we needed to develop were collective structures between ourselves and the tram workers, away from the struggle in the Depot. The Victorian Secretary used his authority to rebuild his influence among the delegates. Eventually, the Support Group broke up.

The dispute confirmed my syndicalist philosophy. The tram workers, ceasing to rely on their own union leadership (who sold them out), played a leading role in the dispute. Their confidence was bolstered by the Support Group's help and their own struggle. In that last week, they took real class action until isolated by lack of support from other Depots. More importantly, there was no real solidarity shown by other workers and left political types. While four members of the International Socialists did support the militant tram workers actions, the rest were often outside in Sydney Road selling their papers and throwing criticisms at us.

It is not hard to see why this dispute has been ignored by Labor Party and union historians.



SPARKS

ALL POWER TO THE DEPOTS!

January 1, 1990

The first day of a new decade and trammies showed that bosses are redundant. A sign was put up outside the Brunswick Depot saying: *UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT: WORKERS CONTROL*. At Essendon Depot, they raised a *CONNIES FOREVER* flag. On that day, workers control stopped being an idea and became a reality. Sure, it was sabotaged by management when they turned off the power and opted for a lockout, but it had created a feeling of strength. It felt good to be in control. It felt good to run the system as a service. It felt good to see other trammies as fellow workers with a common bond. People came from all over the place to midnight depot meetings, and drivers couldn't get out fast enough to take trams out of the depots. It was amazing to take the trams in and blockade the city, and to fight for something worth fighting for.

This dispute is one small part of our self defense as working people wanting a life free from bureaucrats, bosses, polities fucking up our lives "for our own good". Some disputes can lead to victories but many do not, and we should have no illusions that victory is inevitable. After all, what is victory? Going back to long hours of shift work, the same old incompetent management, having to rake shit for a rundown, overcrowded "system"? A victory is something where you are better off, when you come with out than when you went in. So, of course, no stupid ticket system. No job losses. No standing in the rain selling tickets. No being a pseudo-inspector. But, if the MET wins this one, what are the chances for no days-off cancelled, no split shifts, better maintained trams, better services? The very idea of a "service" is poo-pooed by the corporate megabuck managers. They don't give a shit about some old worker who has to walk a kilometer to buy a ticket, or who is attacked, or who falls off a moving tram, or who collapses in a crush. If you are on a tram you must be a nobody — whether passenger or worker!

If this dispute is to be won, what trammies are doing now needs to be well organised plus we need tactics to take it further.

ROLL UP, ROLL UP, ROLL UP

It was bitterly disappointing to have our own Union's members on the buses go back to work after 4 days. At least, they went out again on January 15, along with our railworker friends. But token stoppages are not enough. We urgently need lots of action happening, across the industry and, if possible, beyond the industry. Our success or failure rests with others stepping in and placing pressure on the connie-killing "ALPee". If action doesn't

start happening, and the Government sits us out, then the financial and emotional strains will wear many of trammies down. That has drastic consequences for every worker in the public transport industry, indeed for workers across the country.

Times may be tough....they'll get even tougher unless we win this one. "Lose" a bit now and the rewards will be apparent when you seek the support of trammies in any future dispute in your workplace. Maybe a general strike sounds out of the question at the moment; although, it would certainly lead to a quick resolution. What about weekly or twice weekly strikes; no fares - to keep the passengers happy until you are stood-down like the trammies stoppages or stop-works generally. Mail to the PTC could be lost by postal workers; telephones, lifts in buildings could remain unrepaired. Fuel deliveries for MET vehicles stopped. Place some bans on, picket the nearest MET Ticket outlet. Do Something.

Pete, Brunswick Depot

TRANSPORT CUTS COMPROMISE SAFETY THE WORLD OVER!

Sparks has built up contacts with rank and file transport workers across the world. When Melbourne's trammies took over their depots and ran the trams into the city, we got in touch with our brothers and sisters in London and asked them for some supportive action. On January 15, 30 rail and bus workers plus supporters demonstrated outside the London office of the Victorian Agent-General. Carrying placards and banners, they distributed leaflets to passers-by, then gave the Agent-General a letter condemning the actions of the Victorian Government in removing conductors.

Sparks has since contacted transport workers in Spain, Brazil, France, Italy and the USA seeking similar supportive actions.

STOP PRESS: Messages of support have come in from the National Labour Confederation of Spain; the National Labour Confederation of France and the Direct Action Movement in Britain. All are members of the International Workers Association (IWA). These organisations are sending protest letters to the Victorian Government and are organising protests outside embassies and Australian businesses. A demonstration by members of the Workers Solidarity Alliance is planned in New York for Saturday, January 27.

JANUARY 6

Trammies, we can be proud of ourselves for the way we are conducting this dispute. The trams are still blockading the city, giving the dispute a high profile. At least 6 depots are occupied, including some of the managers' offices. At most of these depots, there are committees that have been set up to carry out various responsibilities such as

security, finances rosters and the like. Sign-on books are being kept, after all it's a lockout not a strike.

Despite the fiasco with the buses, and the feeling of being kept in the dark by the Union, morale is still high and, if support continues to come in, it will stay that way. Support groups are vital to all this - and the more communication between workers and supporters, the stronger we get.

There are still a lot of trammies who think the Union will sort it all out, the answer is negotiation. Well, that's falling right into the Trades Hall Council trap. The question of keeping connies is not negotiable; I've heard too many drivers say they'll resign, if the connies go, to think otherwise. Transport Minister, Kennan, has to back down and that's all there is to it. Walking a mile to buy a ticket is a stupid idea, and he should have to wear it.

Now the Union officials will be under a lot of pressure to back-down. In most disputes that's what happens. But if the depots stay solid, they can't go in and bargain away jobs because they know they won't be able to go to another depot again; and by depots, we don't just mean the delegates and proxies, but everyone. A lot of people are still sitting around thinking that someone else should do the work, someone else should raise money, or go and speak, or whatever it's time you lot got off your arses.

This dispute is the make or break for all concerned. Either Kennan wins out or we do. A three month trial of anything is just a trick, and has any worker been told yet what the eight points of the peace plan were? That's how things run from Trades Hall the full timers work it out, sell it to the Government, and then try and back the workers into a corner so they've got no choice but to give in. So, it looks like we are digging in. They'll try and take the depots when they realise that we aren't going to break easily so we should be very wary of leaving the depots short of numbers. They might try and get people to the city on a false alarm first or even a sizeable diversion. But let's face it, where will they take the trams if they can move them? The best they can do is block off the suburban streets and then they'd have to guard them to stop them being moved again. No, first they have to get the depots - so we have to stay put.

And it's a good time to go to the surrounding shops and ask for support, and to keep a record of which ones give and which ones don't, so when it's all over people should buy at the shops that backed us up. That's what solidarity is all about. And what about the local job sites, factories, offices: it's time to walk in and ask to see the delegate and see if some money can't be raised. Don't be put off by some scumbag telling you to piss off, ask to see someone else. Already the Colonial Sugar Refinery workers, who remember the solidarity they got during their recent dispute, have offered money.

And support is coming in from other workers in the industry; train drivers collected \$100 and Guards \$600, with more to come. Station assistants have raised \$100. The dispute still hangs in the balance and we still say: *ALL POWER TO THE DEPOTS.*

Twenty four days since we took over the trams and the depots! Phew; who would have thought? And we've still got a way to go to win.

Community solidarity has been amazing. People hate the "scratchies" and love trammies. Money, food, ideas, posters have been rolling in. There's been civil disobedience actions, tram fiestas, benefits planned, plus all the day-to-day work of maintaining pickets, cooking food, etc., etc., etc. And a 90% vote to say "Stick It" to the Government's offer.

But the dispute is not without its problems. There is a risk that we will get "done" in negotiations. The Government might try the heavy hand with the cops at the pickets and the Depots.

It is disappointing too that our comrades on the buses and the trains have not been out with us. If they had, we might be still getting over the hangover from the victory party rather than still locked out.

We've got a lot to fight: Driver-Only-Operation, the Government's image, Kennan's ego, the ALP's plans for "restructuring". But we've got a lot to win - our jobs and those of lots of other transport workers.

The trammies need to stay strong. And we need support! More community support and INDUSTRIAL SUPPORT!

This doesn't have to be all out strikes. There are other ways if finances and the union bureaucracies block all out action. But the trammies need it, we all need it, now!

Sparks Mob

BRUNSWICK BUILDS BRIDGES

Brunswick Depot has had a steady stream of workers coming in from different industries to give talks and/or show videos about disputes/strikes they've been involved in.

* An Australian Nurses Federation member talked about the 50 day nurses strike in 1986 and showed *"Running Out of Patience"*.

*Two ARU guards talked about the Xmas '87 Guards strike

*A Pilot's Federation member spoke about the pilot's dispute

*A Wharfie came and left a video about the history of struggle on the waterfront.

* Likewise, trammies have gone to the wharf, hospitals and to the Colonial Sugar Refinery to explain this current dispute.

Everytime this rank and file contact has occurred there has been a greater degree of understanding and solidarity developed between the workers involved. It's certainly more educational than reading about it in the papers, or on the telly, and, of course it is more accurate and truthful too.

After rebel workers had driven their trams through the warm January summer night into the city of Melbourne in a bid to maintain the service of transport to the public, the PTC, on behalf of Jim "scratch the service out of public transport" Kennan, shut the power of the entire system down.

Thus, the Minister for Transport made the public hostage to a stubborn minded approach in a dispute about changes to public transport that the public doesn't want, and doesn't deserve in the first place. In this spirit the passenger support groups were set up. Brunswick and inner city residents did see the need for community support behind industrial action.

Now you'd think that any user of public transport who wants to support the trammies in their fight to retain conductors would be welcomed. That was the case in Brunswick, and later in Preston and Kew but not so in the South Melbourne Depot.

There a certain "colourful ATMOEA identity" saw the Support Group as a threat to his reign and acted accordingly. He questioned the motive of the Support Group, told lies about them, constantly harassed members of the Support Group and made their task, of providing trammies with food, money and support, impossible and, therefore, played into the hands of the bosses and the Transport Ministry. This sad affair came to an end when the Support Group decided to leave the South Melbourne Depot and join the groups in Brunswick and Preston, where delegates were acting in true fashion by informing their members and have decisions made on the floor. This is exactly the way a union should work and one would hope that the workers of South Melbourne Depot keep that in mind and remember that this "colourful identity" failed them in his official capacity by acting against their wishes and, indeed, their mandate.

Carol (from the Support Group)

THE JOLIMONT RAIL YARD ACTION

On January 31, we turned to the railworkers for support through a picket at Jolimont Rail Yard in Melbourne and got it. The ATMOEA official "sellout brigade" then tried to panic members, by saying that if there are any more pickets, the Federal Branch will sack the Victorian officials and, with Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) backing, the Victorian Branch will be deregistered like the Builders' Labourers' Federation (BLF) was. The ATMOEA bureaucrats told the Australian Railways Union boss, Joe Sibberas, that we were not an "official picket", so the ARU would not recognise the picket.

Despite the threat of hundreds of police massing to arrest, and evict us, and the Premier blowing his top against us on all the media, we stuck the picket at Jolimont Yard, out from 4am until the arvo when the members of the ARU, not the slippery officials, carried a unanimous declaration in support of our picketing at any time in support of the retention of tram conductors:

"This meeting of ARU delegates, in line with resolutions endorsed by the VTHC Public Sector delegates, station, maintenance and operations members, supports the placing of pickets at any PTC location by members by PTC unions, particularly ATMOEA rank and file picketing Jolimont Yard in support of retention of tram conductors."

Moved V. Moore, Seconded G. Walters, Carried unanimously 31/1/90

Connie X.

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"This dispute confirmed my syndicalist philosophy. The tram workers, ceasing to rely on their own union leadership (who sold them out), played a leading role in the dispute. Their confidence was bolstered by the Support Group's help and their own struggle."



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