

The Sydney Save Bus Conductors Campaign of the 1970's

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Introduction

The 1970's in Australia witnessed the mushrooming of numerous rank and file opposition movements in diverse industries. The following interview focuses on one such grouping which emerged in the context of a major battle to fight a management/Government attack – in the shape of the removal of conductors from Govt. buses in New South Wales. It spotlights the difficulties confronting grass roots organising and resistance in public transport, particularly with regard to the various tentacles of the Rightwing ALP (Australian Labor Party) machine and provides some valuable lessons to be drawn from the experience. Today, with moves being made to privatise Govt. buses as foreshadowed in the Parry and Unsworth reports into the N.S.W. Bus Industry, the development of militant/direct action on-the-job organisation is a vital priority in defeating this challenge. Ed.

Rebel Worker: I understand that you played a significant role in the late 1970's, in the fight to retain bus conductors in Sydney?

FORMER LEICHHARDT DEPOT DRIVER MILITANT: Yes, that's right. We had a rank and file activist group at Leichhardt depot which was the major focus of opposition to the removal of conductors. The group consisted of a group of friends. In addition, we had contacts/sympathisers at a few other depots. There was no formal organisation. I know of only one other group opposed to the ALP (Australian Labor Party) associated union official sell outs which controlled the ATMOEA (Australian Tram & Motor Omnibus Employees Association) (now RTBU (Rail Tram & Bus Union) that was the bus industry branch of the Socialist Party of Australia. I am unaware of their activities. Unlike Sparks, we had no magazine/regular newspaper. We put out occasional leaflets at union meetings and to commuters.

RW: What were the activities of your group?

FLDDM: Our activities took two forms: on the job activity and activity to secure commuter support via the Bus Action Group. Our on the job activity entailed attempts to have motions passed at mass and depot meetings to take industrial action over the issue. As well, we held wildcat "no fare runs," through informal agreements with drivers. The public was alerted of these regular "free" trips and we would put up posters protesting the removal of conductors. We also put out petitions/leaflets which we distributed to passengers. In relationship to our commuter outreach activity, we tried to set up the Bus Action Group as a way of acquiring commuter support for the campaign. We put out and distributed 10,000 leaflets and at our first meeting at Leichhardt Town Hall, we attracted 30-40 people, mainly bus workers. The next meeting we called had a very poor turn out and the Bus Action Group collapsed

RW: What were the techniques deployed by the PTC (Public Transport Commission – now State Transit Authority/Rail Corp.) bosses, the union official "sell outs" and the ALP State Govt. to foil your campaign?

FLDDM: At Leichhardt Depot, the conservative union rep. was a member of the ALP rightwing "machine" and was a stooge of the bosses. He had one or two light duties workers on side, who would lurk around the depot and try to listen into our conversations. I remember one occasion where we had gone into the Institute (staff recreational area) to discuss holding a stop work union meeting on the conductor issue. One of them had been listening in and ran off to the Depot manager's office. What usually would happen was, the Depot boss would ring up the higher UTA(Urban Transit Authority (now STA State Transit Authority) bosses, who would then alert the ATMOEA union bosses of our plans. To foil our stop work plan, the union exec. would call for a non-stop work union meeting, which they would attend for the purpose of heading off any militant mass action. They would arrive in cars paid out of union dues, rather than use public transport. The role of the union as an obvious tool of management created great problems for our campaign. At union meetings, any planned action would be leaked well in advance to the UTA bosses by the Exec. and depot reps.

I remember, the union executive would try to boost its credibility with the membership by threatening the UTA with "Free Fare Days" and even strike actions. But they gave the Dept. so much notice (weeks) that the UTA could counter attack in the media with threatened stand downs. The union exec. would then go to the members and say, "No one wants to get stood down. Good! We'll call off the action." It was back to square one with apathy in control.

We didn't consider the concept of special subcommittees at depot level to plan industrial strategy, composed of workers keen to do something. Without the Depot branch official support for our campaign activities, drivers felt intimidated due to the bosses' threats of victimisation.

A common ploy of the union "sell outs" was to say that negotiations with the Govt. were taking place on the conductor issue via their rightwing ALP machine mates on the Trades and Labor Council such as TLC heavies, John Ducker and Barry Unsworth, and any Industrial action by us would threaten negotiations.

Another technique of the union sell outs was to hold stop work meetings in regard to minor issues, such as wearing ties and gratuity entitlements which affected only 5% of the membership those drivers close to retiring who had no super. The union sell outs could "win" these issues and divert attention in the process from the key issue of conductors.

They would call mass meetings in the form of stop works between 10am-2pm. At the meeting the top table would stall with formalities as long as possible to kill the sense of solidarity and power the workers felt when they gathered together as a united body to make a collective decision.

Important issues were usually raised towards the end of the meeting. Discussion would drag out. When the membership looked like taking strong action - industrial or otherwise, then up would pop,

this sycophant of the executive with the plea to "get the kiddies home from school." The exec. would immediately take a vote to adjourn the meeting. In the pandemonium of cries of "foul", etc. The motion was carried, the meeting adjourned and nothing done. Fraudulent promises were also used to sell out the conductors. The union executive always stressed that the State Labor Govt. Minister for Transport, Peter Cox was "on their side" and if we strike "we will lose the ALP Govt. Also "The Minister has promised an expansion of Govt. services into the Western n Suburbs."

RW: Tell me about the history of the removal of the conductors.

FLDDM: In April 1979, two weeks before the opening of the Eastern Suburbs Railway (ESR), the union was in its most powerful position to extract, concessions from the ALP State Govt. Wran and his Minister Peter Cox were making a big swan song about the ESR, opening after 100 years of delay. The new railway could not operate without full cooperation from the Bus union. The Union Exec. had already entered into a secret deal with the Minister to phase out all conductors over a 2 year period. (The last conductors went off at Leichhardt in July 1981). They called a stop work meeting at Redfern Oval, not about the en future of conductors, but about working hours. The meeting considered reducing the maximum rostered shift from 9hrs back to 8 and half hrs per day (with a maximum of 4 half hours before a meal (or shift break). Thus the union was fighting for a 42 and half hour week (we were working a 45hr week then - often longer with DOC's (Day Of Cancelled) and overtime). Sure we needed shorter hours because of stress on the job, etc but not at the expense of conductor jobs.

The exec. at this meeting would not allow motions from the floor to oppose the total phase in of OMB's (One Man Buses) with the opening of the ESR. The Govt. naturally gave in on the shift hours. (A deal done before the meeting). But look at the spread of hours worked now and you'll see how its all been lost again.

The important thing about the Redfern Oval meeting in April 1979 was that the Union Executive pushed through a motion saying that the Eastern Suburbs depots would "work to the new rosters" upon the opening of the ESR provided the State Govt. agreed to the shorter working day.

Disguised in this policy motion was a total acceptance of OMB operations for all the Eastern Suburbs. This was the real death knell for all conductors. This the final vote to eliminate bus conductors from Sydney was made by 3 depots. The 10 other depots including Newcastle) were disenfranchised.

Some like Leichhardt fought a depot level rearguard action to save conductors, but the Union Executive could always claim the Eastern Suburbs precedent had to be followed.

The Opening of the ESR & OMB

The opening of the ESR in May 1979 saw a major escalation of the drive by the Govt./bosses/union sell outs to introduce OMB. This drive had actually commenced in 1959. Since then the 2 man operation had been steadily cutback, at first on the outer suburban routes. In 1977, the union bosses had agreed to Govt. plans for total OMB operations. Conductors were gradually cut from weekend work and off peak services and public holidays. Usually the cuts were introduced for a "trial period".

This inevitably became permanent. With the opening of the ESR, conductors were removed from Waverley, Randwick and Port Botany (then Pagewood). Many feeder bus services were cut out entirely and other routes were taken over by private bus companies.

The union "sell outs" had sold this deal with management promises of a \$40 pw rise, a pay off for driving OMB's and also the extension of Govt. bus services into the western suburbs. No extra \$40 allowance was ever received by drivers. The \$25 rise they did receive was a metal Industry award flow on, which would have been received anyway. The Govt. was of course not serious about extending out bus services. Whenever the Govt. would broach the issue in the media, TWU (Transport Workers Union – also controlled by the Rightwing ALP "machine") officials (TWU enrolls private bus drivers) would threaten to have TWU tanker drivers cut off the delivery of diesel supplies to Govt. bus depots. At Leichhardt depot they cut off supplies twice.

The Shelley Greer Victimisation

In Dec. 1979, a dispute developed over opening of the backdoor of OMB buses at the Bondi Junction interchange associated with the ESR. Rank and file militant Shelley Greer from Waverley was victimised/stood down due to refusing to open the back door without supervision – this was union policy, which had been agreed to by UTA management.

The union sell outs refused to call a general stop work meeting to consider the issue - only Waverley depot attended stop works on the issue. The union sell outs were able to divert attention away from the issue at hand to the reinstatement of Shelley Greer. They were able to push through acceptance of backdoor opening without supervision on a "trial period". It unsuccessfully argued at the meeting that if such a "trial" commenced, it would inevitably become permanent.

The "Bus Action Group"

As a rearguard measure given the introduction of OMB in the Eastern Suburbs, we launched the Bus Action Group (B.A.G.). As mentioned earlier, the second meeting of this group had a very low turn up and contributed to its collapse. A major reason for this development, we later discovered was the infiltration/white anting of B.A.G. by members of Action for Public Transport Group (A.P.T.). Members of this Group at that stage included managers from Transport House (HQ's of now Rail Corp/STA) and are connected with the ALP. One of them in particular monitors bus drivers - he would ring the STA bosses if buses are late at certain stops, The A.T.P. had a "them and us" mentality. They saw commuters and public transport users as having nothing in common with Public Transport workers. They were all for "labour saving" technology, like automatic ticketing. They did not see the reduced manning levels on the buses and train stations meant reduced services and human contact.

Thus they undermined the B.A.G. who argued workers and commuters had a common interest in maintaining effective and properly staffed public transport. The B.A.G. also argued "new technology" should benefit workers through reduced working time and not just as "cost saving".

The arguments of the A.P.T. that removing conductors would lower fares was a fallacy. Fares

continued to rise, services declined with increasing resignations over increased stress levels associated with OMB operations and journey times increased to the inconvenience of the public.

Some of the A.P.T. lobby held positions on the Govt's "Commuter Council" along with Govt./union/boss representatives. Given this technocratic attitude and their connections, I would certainly be scandalised if there was evidence to suggest they sought to sabotage the B.A.G. However, one of them who joined our group said he would mail out for free leaflets for our next meeting and was given our mailing list. He kept the mailing list for his own group and he didn't send out any leaflets for the next meeting. Another one of them tried to financially undermine the group – he worked for a print shop and he quoted one price for leaflets. When we received the leaflets the price had been doubled.

RW: What lessons have you drawn from the campaign to save the conductors?

FLDDM: Crucial to winning this battle was a formal rank and file group organised between depots, not just an informal group linked to one depot as in our case. Only by this means is it possible to defeat the tactics of the union sell outs and pursue hard hitting effective action. When the Sun newspaper, Fairfax's afternoon throw-away gutter-rag ran a series of articles attacking bus conductors as "lazy" - we wanted to blockade Broadway outside the Fairfax Empire. However without the rank and file group properly organised we couldn't react in time. It was a dead issue in the media before we managed to get a consensus. Nothing happened.

Of course it would have worked better if the leadership had come from the Union head office. But as usual they sat on their thumbs and did nothing - not even a counter press release or even a letter to the editor.

RW: What have been the outcomes of the removal of conductors?

FLDDM: Following the removal of conductors from the buses, queue conductors were to take over some of their functions. Such as selling tickets and advising commuters. These jobs were steadily abolished, with newsagents' takeover of ticket pass selling as a result of Govt. subsidies which reduced revenue collected by queue conductors. The effect of the loss of conductors from the buses was a depersonalisation and slowness of service. Drivers are too busy to take over the functions of the conductor such as providing information, helping people on the bus, etc. Whilst passengers needed to queue to get on buses. The slower service meant that passengers missed connections with trains and ferries, encouraging them to rely on cars. The failure of the Govt. to expand bus services into in the Western Suburbs has led, them to subsidise private bus companies to improve their service, although still inadequate. In these areas also, commuters are obliged to resort to cars. This general deterioration in service caused by the conductors removal has encouraged the Govt. in its current rampage against Public Transport services. The loss of the conductors meant a decline in ATMOEA membership from 5500 to 4000 which encouraged the union sell outs to merge the ATMOEA with other PT unions to form the PTU (Public Transport Union, Rail Tram & Bus Union) "Super Union".

In some ways this should benefit the workers. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's the rightwing Labor

hacks/careerists in the ARU (rail union) had a gentlemen's agreement with their confederates on the Bus Union. That if there was a train strike, the buses would always continue working and never go on strike in sympathy - even if the issues (job security, wages, cutbacks) affected both forms of transport.

Hence bus drivers working on routes that criss-crossed train services (including the inner city) were forced to "scab" on train workers. The Union did nothing to help. They didn't even complain when inspectors forced drivers to overload the buses at major commuter choke points like Circular Quay and Central Railway.

During these rail strikes, the ARU (Australian Railways Union) and the Bus Union did nothing about the TWU private coaches being used to replace trains. A couple of years ago these private companies even ran their "scab buses" over the normal bus routes, during a bus strike. The Bus Union executive did nothing apart from squeal in the media. Not even a picket! (In reality since the union mergers – the rank and file of the bus and rail unions have remained effectively in separate bureaucratic unions and there has been no coordination of industrial action involving the rail/bus divisions of the RTBU. In reality, there has only been a merger of union bureaucracies. Ed)

Current plans to further "rationalise" and "privatise" Govt. bus services can be directly linked to the Union's failure to stand up for the interests of PT workers and commuters in the past. An understanding of what was lost and how it was lost will help workers fight the current cuts in services. With proper organisation at a depot and inter depot level, the union bureaucrats and State Govts who in effect are just mouthpieces for the roads lobby and Big Business interests such as TNT who have a vested interest in making all transport "Private" can be defeated. Remember private profits mean private squalor.