

RTBU NSW update: climate change

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A recent post we put up about some of our members and NSW Branch staff attending the School Strike for Climate Change really sparked some debate among our membership. The post itself generated a lot of comments – both positive and negative – and we also received a number of phone calls to the office.

Firstly – thank you for your engagement, no matter which side of the fence you're on. We are all the union and having a vocal and active membership is vital to our success. The strength of the RTBU has always been the diversity of ideas and the ability of the rank and file to participate and have a voice in the decision-making processes of our union.

While many of our members were supportive of the strike, the post brought a really important issue to the forefront and made us realise that we as a union need to be more consultative on this serious issue.

Of course we are 100% supportive of our members who work in the coal industry and rely on the industry to make ends meet. That support is unwavering and always has been – we're sorry if the photos we posted in any way made people feel that this wasn't the case. We will make sure that in the future the impacted delegates are first consulted on any decision to attend rally that may affect our members.

With that said, as a union we have a responsibility to look to the future and constantly be evaluating what is best for our members and their jobs.

In today's industrial climate there are the usual threats that face any union – like decisions from conservative governments, which include the current attempts to further criminalise unionism, and continued attacks on our members' conditions by hostile employers.

But we also have two equally real threats facing us: technology and climate change.

We now have driverless trains in Sydney, and a government that is adamant about removing train guards from trains and introducing driver-only operation by stealth. Following on from this it will only be a small step for freight operators to revisit the introduction of driver-only operation. We also know that in-cab cameras and Automatic Train Protection (ATP) will affect our current roles.

The other major issue facing the union and its membership is climate change.

Whether people accept the climate science or not, we need to accept that there's a global push towards limiting the impacts of climate change and it would be irresponsible of us not to recognise that and the impact it will have on us.

As a union with members whose jobs are heavily entwined with this issue, it's important we're proactive and play a role in shaping the future of our industries. Our futures and our jobs rely on it.

That's why we've been researching the issue for some time and believe we need to start having conversations about how we can make the transition to a low carbon economy work for us. Because if, as all indications suggest, that's the way the world continues to go, we want to be at the forefront of those discussions in our industries.

Just for the record, last Friday's rally was not formally endorsed by the Executive of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, however it was endorsed by Unions NSW and approximately 30 unions participated on the day, with some on the stage publicly stating their total support.

In our case, a number of members advised that they would be attending and asked if the RTBU were going to take part. Subsequently, a number of our staff including officials who have strong personal views decided that they would attend. Some members have since raised the legitimate issue of whether people should have attended the rally as representatives of the union without properly discussing it with the membership first. That's a valid point, and one which we have taken on board.

What is clear though is that as a union we have a responsibility to look to the future and constantly be evaluating what is best for our members and their jobs. Like the union movement across Australia and globally, we recognise workers are going to be at the forefront of the transition to a low carbon economy, and we have a responsibility to play a role in that.

That's why we're beginning a process of putting together a comprehensive plan that looks at the future of our industries – passenger and freight. We'll be in touch with more detail on that in the near future, but it will certainly involve getting your insights and views around what the future of our industry should look like.

Job security has always been, and will always be, a number one priority for the RTBU. We also believe in everyone's right to strike and feel strongly that unions have always played a vital role in social issues. We won't shy away from that, and we will do better to make sure the whole union comes on that journey too.

Australian railway workers have a proud history of standing up for important social issues. In the 1970's, Uranium mining was defeated by strong, unionised, railway workers by refusing to load it and making a stand against a dangerous foe. As unionists, some of our decisions are hard. But the common thread is our power to make change when we all stand together.

Thanks again for all the comments, feedback and involvement in this issue. We're going to move forward together as a union and together we'll make our jobs and industries stronger.