One of the most effective and political cohesive campaigns to emerge in Victoria in recent years has produced a strong alliance between unions and passengers over the future of the state’s public transport system.

How have Victoria’s rail workers managed to break through the isolation imposed by hostile governments and inconvenienced commuters? And what are the implications for future campaigns in this and other areas?
Most of those who campaigned against the Liberal policies of fare increases, line closures, maintenance cutbacks and freeway obsession are evaluating the Cain government's performance by the same yardstick. Have they stopped the freeway projects? Have they opened the closed lines? Have they opened new services and improved the existing ones? Have they replaced the architects of the old policies with new pro-public transport people, and so on?

On-time running has greatly improved, employment has increased particularly in the tramways, some of the closed lines have been reopened, a tram line has been extended, there are staff on all stations, the 38-hour week was granted without major concessions, there is better consultation with unions and users, there is a new organisational structure and a new fare system which offers the potential of more efficiency and coordination, and a program to give trams priority over other traffic has been announced. That's on the positive side.

There has been no significant shift of resources from private to public transport, two expensive freeway projects are continuing, big fare rises have just been announced, and staff cuts are threatened. The reorganisation of public transport bureaucracy did not trim the lurks and perks of the top brass, millions have been spent on new tall poppies (mainly former rent-a-car executives) who offer only the wasteful, slick and superficial practices of private enterprise management. The new boards give representation to the motoring lobby but not to public transport or community activists. That's on the negative side.

I think that activists need to be concerned with more than the achievements of the government in those areas where the Liberals were deficient. In the long term, public transport policies are moulded by community attitudes and by the relative power of unions and community groups on the one hand, and the bureaucracy and motoring lobby on the other. That is not to say we should go soft on the government over its failure to fulfil promises. Quite the contrary, the activists who oppose the fare rises and the new freeways are the backbone of the movement which will change community attitudes and increase the power of the pro-public transport movement. It is simply to say that if the movement restricts itself to the tactics and strategy it had under the Liberals then it is accepting the same relative position of opposition it had under the Liberals. Policy making is given over to the other side; we simply react; we stop some of the bad things but generally things keep on rolling along in the same old bad direction. If the movement restricts itself to judging the government in this oppositional way it will be part of the government's perceived failure in the public transport area. This will make the return of the Liberals more possible.

Some things have been achieved under this government and much more can be achieved. This is because the movement (not just the government) has certain strengths. Building on these strengths is the key to a strategy which, in the longer term, will improve the government's performance, and its chances of staying in office. The strength of the movement arose in the fight against the Liberals; it now needs to develop a strategy beyond the notion that "the government should be left to carry out its promises and when it doesn't, we will oppose it".

One of the important strengths of the movement has been the unions' involvement. Six or seven years ago, both the rank and file and the leaderships of the unions generally regarded transport policy as none of their business, although the decline of the industry was leading to poor amenities and working conditions, demoralisation and loss of industrial strength. The main industrial weapon, the strike, was used by the Liberals to paint a picture of a declining, chaotic industry which should be cut back. This view of the inevitable decline of a chaotic, inefficient, strike-prone industry was very widely held in the community. This was fertile ground for the development of new tactics and directions in the unions. Nonetheless, it was a long hard battle against traditional ideas and practices. For example, many tram conductors had little sympathy for the passengers who constantly abused them for the problems of a run-down service. And new tactics aimed at strengthening the movement for better public transport such as non-collection of fares, selective bans, and work-to-rules required a much higher level of union organisation than the traditional strike tactic. In many cases, an isolated tram crew would have to refuse the orders of an inspector and thus risk discipline or the sack. Such actions required a high level of understanding of the issues involved, and a high level of confidence that the trade union would back the workers.

This required the regrowth of job bulletins, job committees and organisation for its success. A group of activists with such a clear and consistent strategy was also needed (especially since these ideas were unpopular at first). The Communist Party played an important role in this.

The unions' involvement greatly strengthened the impact of the community groups. The extensive knowledge the rank and file have of the system was tapped in different ways. Many members believed that it was the bosses who had all the knowledge (except their own immediate boss whom they knew to be a dill). By increasing the members' knowledge of the overall plans the bosses had for the system, members could see the relevance of their own local knowledge. It was then possible for the rank and file to suggest ways of overcoming the problem in the services, and to then gather community support for their proposals. This breakdown of the barriers between politics and unionism offers the potential for a big shift democratic control.

The biggest weakness in the movement under the Liberals, and still, today, under Labor, is the failure to decisively break the strong hold of certain conservative ideas in the community. There is a general belief that public transport deficits are an enormous burden on the taxpayer and this belief restricts support for growth. There is also a general view that public transport only caters for a minority, that most people want to use or have to use a car and, therefore, more roads must be provided. It is in response to these ideas that the Minister, Steve Crabb, has backed the new freeway projects, put the roads lobby on the new boards,
appointed private enterprise marketers to increase "efficiency" (reduce the deficit), and failed to shift resources from private to public transport. I think Steve Crabb is wrong to cave in to these ideas but it is equally wrong to think that he alone can change them. The strategy of the movement and the government must be to begin to shift resources from private to public transport in such a way that it shifts the dominant ideas on this question.

Planning of Melbourne has been left up to the greedy developers and the motor car industry. There is widespread popular opposition to the consequences of this — pollution, lack of community, closure of local shops, lack of mobility, rundown of public transport, traffic, accidents, noise, unsafe local streets, and so on.

Discussion on these questions dominate in local papers and at local councils. The popular feeling on these issues should directly counter the ideas that public transport only caters for a minority and that public transport deficits are too big a burden on the community. However, while people will fight fiercely to keep cars out of their own street, they often act as if what happens in the street next door is none of their business. Transport is seen as a matter of individual choice, not something which will be altered by community planning. Our strategy must be to link the concerns about transport and planning at a local level to strengthen our challenge to these policies at a city-wide level. This will change the dominant ideas and greatly strengthen the power of union and community groups.

It is not a question of throwing away our methods of agitation, propaganda and the development of the resources and abilities of the activist few, but rather of seeking to arm these activists with a strategy which will make our ideas the conventional ones. Of course, work to develop support and activity within the ALP and its branches is very important, but it is also the extra-parliamentary movements (the unions and the community groups) which are crucial. The ALP will respond to the pressure of the movement. The Communist Party can play an important role in the development of an effective strategy through our ideas and discussions and also because of our independence from the ALP. This independence allows us to put our relations with the movements and its activists ahead of electoral concerns.

At the present time, the strategy of the government is contradictory — there are some things which the movement can support and develop while there are others that harm the development of the movement.

The government has placed a great deal of emphasis on better marketing of services. Advertising, cleaner carriages, on-time running, better timetable information, etc. will achieve some significant short-term improvements. However, it is essentially little more than better serving of the existing demand. The demand needs to be changed. Currently, it is reflected in subsidies to private motor travel through low parking charges, and government payment for roads, for services to meet the car-based sprawl, accidents, pollution, etc. The low level of demand is also a reflection of the absence of sensible planning of shops and workplaces and the absence of neighbourhood, local and district centres which can form the basis of public transport nodes. Without this, public transport does not form a reliable network such that, if you want to do something different after work, it is still practical to use public transport.

With the reorganisation of transport there is an attempt to use resources more efficiently to meet demand. This leads to a concentration on radial services to the city which, because of decades of car-based planning, is a declining market. Concentration on radial services also ignores the importance of a network if public transport is to be a viable alternative to the car. Apart from the radial peak services to the city, public transport is seen as serving the disadvantaged — the transport poor. The disadvantaged are less mobile — make less demand — and their benefits are always the casualties of budgetary restraint. The demands of those without access to cars will always be subsidiary to those of the car users until there is a change in town planning.

In the context of existing demand, the policy of better utilisation of resources will quickly take the government down the same road as the Liberals — line closures, job losses, lower level of service (e.g. no more conductors). On the other hand, more efficient use of resources in the context of planning for decreased car dependence will mean more jobs overall and better services. In this context, some new technology, new work practices, transfers and retraining offer a more secure industry rather than a threat to jobs and conditions.

It is the slogan of better utilisation of resources that has led the minister to appoint those former rent-a-car executives to senior positions.

There have been some developments which will assist the projection of a strategy away from meeting existing demand towards reducing car dependence and strengthening those movements which support this. I will discuss a few of these developments.

Some of the recent disappointments such as the fare rises and the go-ahead for the freeways, together with the
roads lobby threat to the good policies, have led to some of the pre-election forces getting together again. This includes conservation, energy, transport action, and community groups, local councils, unions and parliamentarians. There is growing recognition that simply protesting against the bad decisions is the other side of the "leave it up to the government policy". There is an attempt to develop a long-term alternative strategy to link transport and planning policies, strengthen the movements and change public opinion. Already, local councils are taking initiatives in this area — formulating progressive policies and acting to pressure and support the government to carry out policies to reduce car dependence. Success in this area depends on involving those concerned to protest at the failings of the government while not collapsing into a simple oppositional strategy. Those interested in a particular reform will not become interested in a broader strategy if their particular issue is forgotten. The strategy must not become subordinate to the interests of an ALP government, or it will fail.

The policy currently being implemented which will do most to build a strategy for reduced car dependence is the tram priority program. Here, the government is challenging the established ideas and the roads lobby. Under the slogan of the fairway, the idea is being sold that it is in the interest of the community to make tram trips faster and more reliable. Just the existence of the policy has raised the level of debate on these fundamental issues in the community.

Tram priority was included in ALP policy because of the union and community movements before the election. Since the election the tramways union has been involved on a day-to-day basis with the implementation of the policy. This has meant that the many pressures to slow down and water down the policy have been resisted with some success. The pressure of the roads lobby, and obstruction by a hostile bureaucracy, would have scrapped the policy in a largely invisible way but for the union involvement. The details of what measures were needed on each street were provided by tram drivers in the depots. This led to an interest and involvement in the project that will keep the pressure up for speedy implementation. The roads lobby has organised a big campaign against the project, but the union has countered with conductors and drivers collecting signatures to petitions from passengers in support of the project, and by direct contact with councils and community groups. Councils and community groups were, at first, hostile, believing that giving more road space to trams would push traffic into local streets and force parking restrictions in shopping centres. However, when the links between tram priority and protection of the local community were explained, opposition turned to support. Those in the bureaucracy who supported government policy welcomed the union involvement, while others who were initially opposed came to support the policy. One group of Kew residents took up a big petition against the tram-only lanes, but when they realised it would stop right turning traffic taking short cuts through their streets, the same residents supported an extension of the tram lane.

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The government has retreated to some extent and the scheme is still at risk and under pressure but, because of the process described above, we will achieve something significant. The value of reforms which increase the access to information and the involvement of the union rank and file is evident. Rank-and-file support for such reforms arises from more immediate demands. Campaigns over recent years have developed an understanding that the stresses of inadequate running time, long shift portions and traffic strain are related to ulcers and heart disease. Tram priority and improvements in the service offer some potential improvement. Previously, these things were seen as either the passengers' business, or "facts of life".

I think this illustrates the need to clearly develop two levels of work — propaganda and activity that develops the strength of the militants and activists, and activity and propaganda which challenges conventional ideas in a way which will impact wider forces and create new activists. The tasks are not the same and both are successful. Propaganda which may be successful in organising the committed can be a dismal failure when challenging act, are preserved. There is no pretence that the unions are partners in making decisions. Of course, management hopes to snow, or convince, the unions through the process and thus blunt their opposition. However, it offers unions advanced warning of changes and the ability to develop union and community support for alternatives before it is too late. To make effective use of the new information and rights will require considerable changes in the unions themselves as well as training and resources.

The existence of an ALP government opened up the possibilities of shifting community ideas about transport and planning from private enterprise to community involvement and public transport. The extent to which ideas are changed and a strategy for the implementation of progressive policies begun, depends on increasing the power and understanding of the transport unions and community groups, as well as the practices and performance of the government.

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