



# RAIL, TRAM & BUS UNION

Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union

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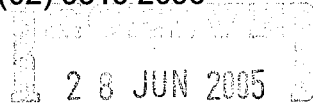
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Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Migration  
Department of House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra 2600

ex: mig  
RDA

Friday, 24 June 2005

Dear Sir/Madam

Please find below a submission by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union about the impact of skilled migration into the Australian rail, tram and bus industry. Unfortunately time does not permit a more detailed submission but we would be happy to provide more information or answer any queries if required.

**There is not widespread use of migrant labour in rail (except WA) but it is widespread in public bus operations.**

Currently the use of overseas labour in the rail industry is not widespread except in Western Australia, where a high number of overseas trained train drivers is employed by companies including Pacific National and the Australian Railroad Group (ARG).

This contrasts with the public bus sector, where a high number of overseas workers and workers from non-English speaking backgrounds, is employed, for an example refer to NSW State Transit.

### **Possibility of assessment of skills prior to arriving in Australia**

Generally it is not possible for skilled migrant workers in the rail, tram and bus industry to be assessed for skills recognition before they arrive in Australia. This is because the work undertaken in our industry is primarily competency based and assessed through the national AQF framework which is currently overseen by ANTA (and by the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training after 1 July 2005).

When a worker from overseas, or for that matter anywhere in Australia, applies for employment in a position in the transport sector which requires a certain level of competence, generally, before they can operate on the job, they must demonstrate that required level of competence and will receive the required AQF certificate.

For workers with prior experience in the transport sector, this assessment will be comprised partly of recognition of prior learning (RPL). However, in virtually all cases, there will be at least several units of training required to provide the worker the required

AQF certification. For example, an applicant for a train driving job who has driven trains in the UK but not in Australia may not require extensive training in the physical operation of a train (use of brakes and throttle) but they will require extensive training in the driving environment and the relevant safe working procedures. Training in safe working can take 2-3 weeks of full time study as drivers are taught to understand Australian signalling systems and their interpretation among other things.

Similarly, training is required for bus operators who migrate to Australia. A bus operator from New Zealand for example, who applies for a bus operation position in State Transit (NSW) is required to participate in State Transit's driver training program. This training can take up to eight days, with a further five days of peer assessment and support on the road.

### **The use of labour hire to 'recruit' migrant workers and poor skills assessment**

One concern for the RTBU is the emergence of 'recruiters' – labour hire companies that recruit overseas workers for specific occupations in the rail industry. These companies do not always ensure that the workers they are supplying to a rail operator have the requisite level of competence to do the job.

For example the RTBU understands that a worker was supplied by a labour hire provider in Western Australia to a large Australia-wide operator. This worker had been a railcar driver in Holland. While the labour hire company ensured that he had been trained in safe working conditions before providing him to the operator, they did not thoroughly check what type of train he was qualified to drive. When this worker drove as second person on the locomotive, it became clear to the other driver that he had never driven a locomotive of this type before. Importantly, there are two types of train-braking systems in Australia – Westinghouse and vacuum brakes. This driver was only familiar with vacuum braking train operation and yet the Australian operator used the Westinghouse system. This driver had also no experience driving freight trains of the length, size and weight operated in Australia. The skill required to operate these trains is much different to the shorter freight train operations elsewhere and to train a migrant driver in these operational requirements can take 3-4months. The placement of this driver on a freight locomotive clearly compromised safe working and also would have been contrary to Western Australian Rail Safety legislation.

Taking into account that example, the RTBU believes that before any worker is employed in the Australian rail, tram and bus industry, their skills must be thoroughly assessed against nationally recognised qualifications and consideration must be given to assessing their skills within the particular context of Australian operations.

To this end, the RTBU needs to raise concerns about the quality of assessment which is undertaken by some Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). An assessment of the quality of training and assessment undertaken by these organisations is desperately required.

Further, the RTBU notes that while the use of overseas labour in the rail industry has been limited to Western Australia at this stage, the employer association in the industry, the Australasian Railways Association (ARA) is currently seeking that a DIMIA placement be hosted by them to assist in increasing the supply of migrant labour to the rail industry. The RTBU believes that this time, effort and money would be much better spent training Australian workers.

### **Why not train Australian workers?**

The RTBU believes that this focus on migrant labour is misdirected. In the transport sector, by the time a worker is recruited, has their skills assessed and any required 'gap' training is provided, the time taken would be not far from the time required to recruit and train an Australian worker. Rather than make the skills shortage and 'poaching' problems a global one, employers and government need to make a strong commitment to training Australian workers.

### **The solution**

As noted above, the first step to solving the skills shortages in the rail, tram and bus industry should not be the short term step of recruiting workers from overseas. Rather training Australia workers and giving those already in the industry an opportunity to develop career paths is a more suitable approach. The rail industry is currently undergoing structural change as a result of technological change (particularly in the area of signalling). These workers should be given an opportunity to switch career paths by learning new skills/knowledge and competencies. For example employers could invest in training a signaller in an electrical trade or train driving skills since these are two areas of critical shortage in the rail industry. Existing workers already have a working knowledge of the industry and if moving with an organisation, would have important organisational specific knowledge. Training these workers would take significantly less time than training someone off the street or from overseas.

Second, if workers do come from overseas to work in the Australian rail, tram and bus industry then a strict process of recognition of prior learning is required. This is currently done by some rail operators such as Queensland Rail and State Transit. However the emergence and growth of 'recruiters' and labour hire companies is of concern, with examples already emerging of migrant workers being placed in jobs which potentially risk not only the safety of their co-workers but also the general public. Part of the problem is the quality of some RTOs and this applies to the training and assessment of all workers in the industry, not just those from overseas.

If you require further information about any of the issues raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Robert Hayden  
National Secretary