



THE ORIGINS OF THE RTBU

The current Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) was formed in 1993 when the Australian Railways Union (ARU) merged with the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemmen (AFULE), the Australian Tramway and Motor Omnibus Employees' Association (ATMOEA), and the National Union of Rail Workers of Australia (NUR), to form the Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union. The union traded as the Public Transport Union (PTU) for the first few years of the amalgamated union. However, this name lost effect as the industry became de-regulated and a range of private operators entered the industry more prominently. The union stopped using the name Public Transport Union, deciding to use the more accurate Rail, Tram and Bus Union in 1997. The current union continues a long and proud history of unionism spanning most of the history of the life of the rail, tram and bus industry in NSW.

Rail and tram industry unions and associations in one form or another have been in existence in NSW since the 1860s and 1870s. There were a number of small sectional and craft unions in existence, variously covering guards, drivers, perway, workshops and tramway employees. Many of the smaller unions were brought together under the umbrella of the Amalgamated Railways and Tramways Service Association, formed in 1908.





State Tramways Employees Associations formed the Australian Tramway Employees Association in 1914, later changing to the Australian Tramway and Motor Omnibus Employees Association. The tramways were an essential part of the development of the public transport system in NSW. The combination of the omnibus, horse-drawn trams, to the introduction of the steam trams (1879) and later electric trams (1883) were the centrepiece of a developing rail and public transport system.



For many years the railways and tramways were governed by the same Department and came under the direct control of the Commissioner for Railways (until 1930). The 1917 General Strike that was to have a profound and lasting effect on the industry, had its origins in the Government Tramway Workshops at Randwick and at the Eveleigh Workshops.

All of the major rail and tram unions were de-registered for their involvement in the 1917 general strike, and were not re-registered until the 1920s. In this time, the government assisted the establishment of a number 'loyalist' unions to replace the more militant unions.



The amalgamation in 1993 was the culmination of major changes in the industry. It was a time of heavy rationalisation in the industry, with services that had existed for a century being wound back or closed, it was also a time when many workers were caught in conflicts over demarcation and job protection. It was a time when former ACTU President, Prime Minister Bob Hawke had put in place a policy of restructuring industrial awards and legislating to create 20 'super unions' to replace the many smaller unions in existence.



The rail and bus union amalgamations were not without power plays, their detractors and internal conflict. However, what resulted from the long amalgamation process was a sensible grouping of rail, bus and tram unions covering most of the industry workforce. Unlike many of the nobbled together hybrid configurations that occurred in other industries, the RTBU managed to construct a coalition of unions, not along ideological or political affiliations, but on the basis of building a strong industry union that could serve each of their traditional constituents from a stronger bargaining position.