

RAILCAR DRIVERS — INDUSTRIAL ACTION

609. Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN to the Minister for Transport:

On Friday, 27 August 2010, 97 railcar drivers rostered to work on that day claimed sick leave or were absent from their rostered shifts for that day. Can the minister provide an update to the house on the measures being taken by the government in relation to this situation?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN replied:

I thank the honourable member for the question. The disruption that occurred on 27 August 2010 is the result of ongoing infighting between railcar drivers and their union representation. This situation had its origins in December 2007 when the railcar drivers elected to withdraw from their industrial agreement to return to award conditions. In June 2009 the government made an offer of up to 15 per cent over three years, which was rejected by the drivers, and they remained on their award conditions, with only state wage case increases to their rate of pay, which have not kept pace with inflation.

Since mid-2009, pre-existing tensions within the Rail Tram and Bus Union of Western Australia have developed into a pretty serious internal dispute, resulting in applications to the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission concerning compliance with the union's rules. The commission has made orders to install an interim branch executive to manage the union's affairs. In recent months dissatisfaction with drivers' wages has led to pressure on the unions to resume bargaining for a new agreement for drivers. Preliminary meetings have occurred since May 2010. Formal negotiations commenced on 8 July this year. The parties are trying to negotiate a fairly simple agreement with discussions on the size and timing of wage increases and the term of the agreement being left to the end of bargaining.

The disruption to services on Friday, 27 August and the decision by more than 200 drivers more recently to authorise a solicitor to negotiate on their behalf have complicated and delayed the resumption of wage negotiations. It now appears that a retired official from an unassociated union is also purporting to speak on behalf of drivers. The essential elements of the current disruptions are pay negotiations and internal union issues. Internal issues relate to state coverage and a desire by some drivers to effect a change of leadership at the state level. This fractured approach is significantly complicating the achievement of a negotiated pay outcome. There are now three differing positions for wage increases on the table. At the request of the Industrial Relations Commission, the union is considering its claim and endeavouring to reconcile its divergent views and internal issues. A draft timetable for future negotiations and a summary of agreed provisions is being provided to the commission. The government is focused on finalising parameters for bargaining to continue as soon as possible. The commission reconvened at 2.00 pm this afternoon to review the position. In the meantime, the commission has in place orders prohibiting industrial action. Any action by drivers to disrupt services would obviously be in breach of the commission's orders, with consequential penalties and disciplinary implications.

I thank the honourable member for her interest in this matter. I am sure that all observers would agree that it is in the best interests of all concerned, including patrons of Transperth, that this matter is resolved amicably so that everyone can get on with providing the excellent services that Perth people are used to receiving.