

Back to days when trams stood still

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"This new ticketing system," wrote Glen Iris resident Robert S. McCormick in a letter to *The Age*, "is just another chapter in the gross mismanagement of Victoria's finances."

No, not another letter about myki, but a ticketing system that came before it, at the start of another decade.

It was the first days of 1990 and Mr McCormick was angry about the new Met Ticket — or "scratchies" as that adventure in ticketing became known.

Before then, Melbourne's tram travellers enjoyed a century of manual ticketing. The era of simple tickets and tram conductors was passing and modern electronic ticketing was upon us.

Scratch tickets were supposed to save the Cain government \$24 million a year, by cutting 550 ticket conductor jobs and 550 train station staff.

Instead, it led to one of the most protracted transport strikes Victoria has seen, as tram conductors fought for their jobs. For 33 days from January 1, 1990, 250 trams were parked in Melbourne's CBD streets by tram drivers. The trams did not move because the government shut down the power grid.

On January 30, former and current tram workers will gather at a pub in Brunswick, on the corner of Sydney and Brunswick roads, to remember the strike that saw the happy ring of tram bells disappear from Melbourne's streets for five weeks.

They were replaced by high face as transport minister Jim Kennan and state tram union secretary Lou Di Gregorio fought it out long and hard.

Di Gregorio, still state secretary two decades later, remembers those weeks — his first in the job — vividly. He still has a map buried away in his desk of where each tram was parked. "The Age did a poll during it and 88 per cent supported our actions. Our people survived during the 33 days from donations of food, money; people came to our aid. We were not fighting for wage increase, we were fighting for the conductors' survival."

It was a battle they finally lost, when the Kennett government rid the city of tram conductors in May 1998. Di Gregorio denies that removing conductors has saved money. "Since they went, we have

merce and Industry's spokesman said work attendance fell. Taxi drivers, however, did well.

Kennan laughs when asked to compare his scratch tickets to the \$1.35 billion myki system. "We were criticised because we spent \$20 million trying to introduce it, but today that doesn't seem to be so much."

He has no doubt that starting the process of removing conductors was the right thing to do. "We were the last city in the world to have conductors. Overseas journalists would say to me 'Conductors? We got rid of these in the 1950s.' We were a generation behind a modern transport system. And conductors weren't particularly good at collecting fares."

Not so, says former conductor Roberto D'Andrea, who slept on a tram in the Bourke Street mall for about a week during the strike. "There were crummy conductors and there were lazy conductors, but there was a core that loved the connection we had with society," he says.

When tram conductors were on the system, 3 per cent of people did not buy a ticket, according to a 1990 government report. Today public transport marketing body Metlink says fare evasion is at 13 per cent.

Marin Cikes, a conductor at the time of the 1990 strike and now a tram driver, says it is far higher. "Easily 20 or 30 per cent of people now either don't have a ticket or they haven't validated one," he says.

Mr Cikes, who met his wife during the strike, sometimes sees tram No. 2020 on the rails. He slept on that tram during the dispute. "It brings back the memories — it was a very special moment," he says.

wasted hundreds of millions on tickets. Now we're on another system that is costing billions. And since the conductors have gone, fare evasion has cost so much more."

Today, Jim Kennan is a senior barrister. Before the tram strike, he was spoken of as a future premier. "I'd become unpopular because of the strike. People wanted the trams running. The union sort of got the blame, but the government definitely got the blame," he says.

The tram strike hit the city hard: CBD retail sales plummeted, and the State Chamber of Com-



The 33-day tram strike brought the city to a standstill.



Roberto D'Andrea and Helen Said were conductors in 1990. With them are Eddie Tuncer (left, background), Marin Cikes and Joe Pitisano, colleagues who still work on the trams.