

New Zealand truck drivers hold mass protests against road user charges

Our correspondents

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On Friday, July 4, some 4,400 truck drivers across New Zealand took part in a mass protest over the rising cost of diesel fuel and increased road user charges for heavy vehicles. Truck convoys descended on all major centres during early morning peak-hour traffic, with an estimated 2,000 in Auckland, and hundreds in Whangarei, Tauranga, Hamilton, Rotorua, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Dunedin and Invercargill. Drivers also turned out to protest in many smaller towns.

Rising costs for truck drivers are reflected in Ministry of Economic Development data, which show that diesel prices jumped 17 cents a litre in May and a further 10 cents in June, to \$1.83. In the year to June, diesel prices have risen by 81.5 cents a litre, and 58.6 cents since the beginning of 2008. Diesel now retails at almost twice as much as it did at the start of 2006.

As a result of these increases, truck drivers are finding it harder than ever to make a decent living, and were reportedly “at boiling point” when Transport Minister Annette King abruptly announced on July 1 an immediate 7 percent increase in road user charges (RUCs). This followed an 11 percent increase last year.

While the protest was endorsed by trucking industry employers, the number of trucks that took part—nearly 20 percent of all registered heavy vehicles in the country—reflected the extent of the drivers’ anger and frustration. Most were either waged drivers or small owner-operators. In many areas, the turnout far surpassed predictions by the Road Transport Forum (RTF) and the Road Transport Association, the industry groups that organised the protest. Convoys of 300 and 128 trucks converged on Tauranga and Rotorua respectively, twice the number expected in both towns; in Christchurch 600 trucks participated, three times more than expected.

The national action was organised in less than three days in response to the Labour government’s decision to increase RUCs overnight after it had previously agreed to a month’s notice. King labelled the protest “outrageous” while remaining silent on the massive fuel costs faced by the drivers. At the same time, she justified the government’s increase by insisting that drivers pay “their fair share” toward the upkeep of the country’s roads.

For ordinary people around the country the protest tapped into a deep reservoir of popular resentment against the Labour government which, after nine years in office, is presiding over devastating attacks on the conditions of daily life.

In the capital, Wellington, 300 trucks entered the city at around 8 am and drove slowly through downtown streets and past

parliament, all the while honking their horns. They were greeted warmly by bystanders who waved as the trucks passed by, while commuting motorists tooted their support.

World Socialist Web Site correspondents spoke to several bystanders. The mood was highly supportive, though some felt the action was rather muted. One observer remarked disappointedly that he had “thought they’d all get out”. A veteran taxi driver, facing the same difficulties with rising fuel costs, expressed thorough approval of the truckers’ action. Other members of the public recognised that fuel costs were a problem for everyone, even though their “cars don’t have loud enough horns”.

A bus driver, expressing his disillusionment with the Labour government, said that although he had voted Labour in the past, he would not do so in this year’s election because he no longer saw the party as representing working people. He recognised that rising fuel prices were a world-wide phenomenon, largely the result of an increase in speculation on the global energy market.

Approximately 90 percent of some 500 emails sent to the *New Zealand Herald* backed the action, reflecting similar results in a TV3 “Campbell Live” survey. One representative message read: “The government has seriously underestimated public sentiment. Increasing RUCs was just the catalyst. I drove to work as usual this morning and it took a bit longer. What I saw on the way was massive positive public support for the truckies.”

Reports unanimously described overwhelming support for the drivers, with bystanders clapping and cheering. In Hamilton, residents came out onto the streets in their nightwear, waving, clapping and encouraging drivers to toot. Road workers blasted out music for the passing rigs and bakery workers handed out pies. A sheet metal worker told the *Herald*: “We’re absolutely behind these truck drivers; I’m sure most New Zealanders are. From what’s being proposed it’s obvious we’re all going to feel the pinch very soon—we need truck drivers.”

In response to this upsurge in popular sentiment, both the government and the RTF quickly moved to limit the action and shut down any ongoing campaign.

On the eve of the protest, transport minister King met with RTF chief executive Tony Friedlander and hastily arranged to set up a “working group” to look at the “formula” that sets user charges. King told *Radio New Zealand*: “I’m told by truckies it’s not about them not wanting to pay [the charges]-it’s about the formula.” The RTF obliged by sidelining the issue of rising fuel prices and confining itself to criticising the government’s “timing” of the

RUC increase. Friedlander said that the industry was “reluctantly protesting” the fact that King had not given sufficient warning.

Unable to call off the protest, the RTF moved to turn it into an exercise in letting off steam. Truck drivers were instructed not to stop or blockade roads. When two drivers used their vehicles to block State Highway 2 outside the town of Tauranga, an RTF spokesperson lashed out, telling the NZ Press Association: “Two idiots decided they would take their own action. The organisers are absolutely furious with them.” Such comments reveal the RTF’s role: to police the truck drivers and prevent their protest from spreading to other sections of the working class—a move further underlined by its decision to not allow drivers to alight from their vehicles, in an attempt to separate them from other workers.

The perspective of the truckers themselves was very different to that of the RTF leadership. On July 1, Steve Murphy, who heads a Christchurch trucking firm, told *Radio New Zealand* that some of his colleagues were ready to spontaneously blockade major centres. Only after “some negotiating and some good talking” were they prepared to let the RTF organise protest action.

One driver told the *New Zealand Herald* that he was disappointed with the way the protest had been conducted: “We should have done what they did in France—park on the highways and cripple the country. I’m surprised—some of these guys even stopped at the lights.” His comment indicated an awareness of the global scale of the problems facing working people, and highlighted the need for solidarity among workers of different nations. The RTF, however, made clear it was in no sense committed to challenging the ongoing assault on truck drivers’ incomes. Immediately following the protest Friedlander told the *Dominion Post*: “We’ve been fully responsible and have not made a case for dropping the increase.”

In the wake of the protest, both King and Prime Minister Helen Clark maintained that the increase in RUCs would not be reversed. Their stance was applauded by the *Dominion Post*, which proclaimed that the truck drivers were not a “special case” before lambasting them for their “attempt to disrupt the lives and businesses of their fellow New Zealanders by trying to snarl up traffic during rush hour”.

According to the *Post*, the “important issue” was to decide the “fairest way” to divide up the \$2.7 billion bill for the government’s national land transport programme in 2008-09. In other words, working truck drivers should be pitted against ordinary motorists who are also forced to pay for roads through taxes on petrol. None of the mouthpieces of the ruling elite suggested for a minute that big business profits should be taxed to pay for the construction and upkeep of essential public infrastructure.

The response of the Labour party and its apologists to the truck drivers’ protest was highly significant—particularly since this was the first nationwide action by a section of the working class in defence of living standards since the onset of the current recession.

Labour’s minister of finance Michael Cullen set the tone by dismissing the protest as a politically motivated stunt orchestrated by Friedlander, who was once a National Party MP. “It’s not an entire coincidence,” he declared, “that the head of the Road Transport [Forum] is a former National Party cabinet minister.”

Cullen did not accept that truckies were aggrieved by the actions of the government and its austerity measures.

Cullen’s position was echoed by Labour’s principal supporters both inside and outside parliament. The Green Party claimed the truckies had “gotten off lightly with just two increases in road user charges since 1989.” The Council of Trade Unions, whose president recently denounced striking junior doctors as giving unions a “bad name”, preferred to remain totally silent on the drivers’ protest.

Particular venom, however, came from the pen of “left” commentator Chris Trotter, who regularly uses his weekly newspaper columns as a means of drumming up support for the floundering Labour government. In the *Sunday Star Times* on July 6, Trotter denounced the drivers’ protest as “one of the most extraordinary demonstrations of infantile and irrational selfishness in this nation’s history”. Drawing on his depth of experience in the middle class protest movement, Trotter argued that had the drivers’ action been motivated by anything more noble than objecting to “contributing their fair share to the upkeep of our roads”, and had they not been protected by “23-tonne shells of steel, glass and rubber”, they would have been set upon by the police and arrested en-masse.

In fact, drivers have a long and militant history in the New Zealand workers’ movement, often leading important struggles to improve pay and conditions. According to the self-styled “lefts” and Labour government backers, however, any workers who fight to defend their living standards today and oppose Labour are nothing but conscious right-wing reactionaries or dupes of the political right.

The protest provoked something of a crisis within the leadership of one protest outfit, the Workers Party. A prominent spokesman, in response to a discussion on the group’s internet blog, denounced the “petit bourgeois” truckers, saying “I don’t think we should suggest that truckers ... should disrupt workers trying to get to work”. While other contributors agreed, the party’s Auckland branch finally decided to intervene in the protest, distributing a leaflet informing drivers that the solution to their pressing problems was to join the unions.

The fundamental orientation of all of these layers is to prevent the working class from drawing the lessons of its bitter experiences and making a decisive political break from Labour and the trade unions. The WSWS insists, on the contrary, that the only way for workers to defend their jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights is to participate in the construction of new political movement of the working class, based on genuine socialist and internationalist foundations.



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