

Australia: Bus drivers strike in defiance of union

Mike Head
26 August 2009

A six-hour strike by 130 bus drivers in western Sydney on Monday morning, carried out in defiance of their union, has produced furious denunciations in the media and from an industrial court judge. The drivers walked out at the Busways Blacktown depot at 3.30 a.m. against the imposition of new timetables that would impose shorter times for routes.

Drivers told the WSWs that the timetables, due to commence in October, would be impossible to meet, forcing them to run late, which would not only inconvenience and anger passengers but cut short the drivers' break periods. The workers said they would be under enormous pressure to drive over the speed limit.

Months of trade union talks with the company have failed to halt the onerous new conditions. Angered by the lack of support from the Transport Workers Union (TWU), the drivers conducted their own stoppage, giving no warning to the union or management. The TWU opposed the strike and intervened to end it as quickly as possible.

Drivers said the timetables would add to Sydney's public transport shambles, which has seen the state Labor government in New South Wales cut the frequency of rail services and scrap plans to extend the rail network to new outlying suburbs. In many outer western and southern suburbs, the so-called public transport system depends almost entirely on heavily government-subsidised private bus companies.

The Busways Group is a large private operator, holding lucrative state government contracts to run more than 600 buses, and employ more than 700 drivers, on approximately 100 routes in the Sydney and New South Wales Central Coast regions, and around 30 more in the state's mid-North Coast area.

Like employers across the board, Busways is utilising the economic crisis, with the backing of the state

government, to demand a productivity speed-up. With unemployment continuing to rise throughout Sydney's western, working class suburbs, the company is actively recruiting drivers willing to accept the new conditions.

The mass media launched a scathing attack on the drivers for halting services from the depot during the morning peak period, claiming that their actions had seriously disrupted and traumatised commuters, as well as school children and parents. As drivers pointed out, this was sheer hypocrisy as passengers were frequently left stranded by delays caused by the existing, already over-stretched timetables.

What really provoked the media's wrath was that the drivers had defied the TWU and taken matters into their own hands. The tabloid *Daily Telegraph* labeled them "rogue drivers" who had acted "without consulting any official of the Transport Workers Union". An editorial declared that a "bolshie minority" had staged a "wildcat strike" because their "tempers led them to ignore even the instructions from their own union".

In the state Industrial Relations Commission, Justice Frank Marks accused the drivers of "industrial thuggery of the worst kind ... in the face of opposition from their elected delegate and without consulting any paid TWU official". The judge ordered the TWU and its members not to take any further industrial action over the timetable.

The response betrays considerable nervousness on the part of the official establishment that the drivers could set an example that would encourage other sections of workers to defy the trade unions and take independent action to defend their jobs and conditions. Over the past three decades, the unions have been the essential instrument in sabotaging any resistance by the working class to the pro-market agenda imposed by successive Coalition and Labor governments on behalf of big business.

During the past year, as the global recession has

deepened, the TWU and its counterparts throughout the union movement have worked hand in hand with the Rudd Labor government to help companies large and small impose far-reaching cuts to jobs, working hours and conditions.

The reaction to a relatively small wildcat strike by Busways drivers reveals just how reliant governments and big business are on the unions. The reference to “bolshie” workers—that is, drawing a parallel between the Busways drivers and the Bolsheviks who took power in Russia in 1917—reveals the growing concerns within ruling circles over the consequences of sharpening social tensions produced by worsening unemployment and deteriorating living standards.

Like other sections of the working class, private bus drivers have been forced to sacrifice pay and conditions. After years of TWU complicity in the introduction of “flexible” conditions, drivers now receive virtually no penalty rates, regardless of how early, late or broken their shifts. Despite the intense pressure of constantly driving in heavy traffic, and being responsible for the safety of thousands of passengers daily, they are paid base rates of just \$50,000 or so a year.

By contrast, the Rowe family, which owns the Busways Group, is thought to be one of the wealthiest in Australia. The extent of its profits, and the government subsidies it receives, is shrouded in secrecy.

Although the Busways management has now agreed to further talks on the proposed timetables, and despite judge Marks’s no-strike order, drivers told the WSWS they would strike again unless the company dropped its demands. The TWU, on the other hand, has worked to isolate the Blacktown depot drivers, even from the workers at the company’s 15 other depots, let alone other bus drivers and transport workers, all of whom face similar attacks.

One driver, who has worked for Busways for 10 years, told the WSWS: “We acted out of frustration after 10 years of fighting oppressive and deficient timetables. The new timetables will be a nightmare. The TWU did not condone the strike, and said we could be fined \$50,000. It’s like a dictatorship.

“The union is useless, and there’s nowhere for drivers to go. The government pays the private bus companies by contracts and it wants us to be slaves—it doesn’t want us to be paid better.

“I am very dubious toward the union and I am disillusioned by all governments—like most people. Every time, we vote governments out, rather than vote anyone

in. The Liberals screw us one way, and Labor does it another way.

“There are drivers who have been here for 20 years and it’s the same problem. The company gives us routes that take 40 minutes, and allows us only 35 minutes. I have one long run now from Blacktown to Riverstone where I am often 20 minutes late. The best I have ever done is 10 minutes late.”

The driver condemned the remarks of Judge Marks, calling them “biased and fascist”. He also answered the judge’s claim that the new timetables were required to match planned reduced train services.

“We are trying to do something about it—to stop the public transport chaos. The new timetables have nothing to do with the new train timetables; the government is also introducing new bus routes. The length of time we are given to drive the routes is not related to the train times.

“We are fed up. We have been through the system to try to get changes and nothing ever happens. We can’t get the union to do anything about anything. The purpose of unions was supposed to be to increase conditions, not decrease them.”

Another driver, who has worked for the company for five years, was bitter about the TWU’s role. “The union blamed the workers for going on strike. We decided that we couldn’t wait for the union. The union is only worried about the \$60 a month we pay in dues.

“The new timetable means less time to complete our routes. We will run late and be blamed by the public. Because we’ll run late, there’ll also be less break time.”

A Busways mechanic voiced support for the drivers’ action. “Everyone has the right to express their grievances, or it’s not a free country. When I get called out for bus repairs, I see the pressure the drivers are under. It’s bad enough to be under pressure from the public, without being under pressure from the company as well.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact