

Australia: Union, courts and media team up against bus drivers' strike

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The mass media, the union and the industrial court joined forces against 130 bus drivers when they walked off the job in western Sydney for six hours on August 24 to fight the imposition of onerous new timetables.

The strike at the Busways Blacktown depot erupted over a basic issue—the company provocatively broke off talks over the new schedules, due to commence in October, that will reduce the already difficult times for drivers to complete their routes. Buses will inevitably run late, disrupting and upsetting passengers, and cutting into drivers' short break periods (see: "Australia: Bus drivers strike in defiance of union").

But for exercising, even briefly, their fundamental democratic right to protest and withhold their labour, the drivers were met with a media witchhunt, demands by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) to return to work forthwith and orders by Industrial Relations Commission judge Frank Marks banning any further industrial action over the timetables.

Radio talkback hosts and TV reporters accused the drivers of endangering school children and preventing people from getting to work. What incensed the commentators most was that the drivers had taken action outside the control of the TWU. Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, labelled them "rogue drivers" who had acted "without consulting any official of the Transport Workers Union".

The walkout began at 3.30 am. By 6 am, a TWU official had rushed to the scene, not to support the stoppage, but to pressure the drivers into going back to work, which they did before 6.30. By early that afternoon, the company and the union had convened a

hearing in the state Industrial Relations Commission, where Justice Marks denounced the drivers for "industrial thuggery of the worst kind ... in the face of opposition from their elected delegate and without consulting any paid TWU official".

Applying the draconian anti-strike laws put in place by state and federal Labor governments, the judge ordered the TWU and its members not to take any further industrial action over the issue, on pain of heavy penalties.

The outcome was a complete sell-out, which the bus drivers, their fellow drivers at other depots and all transport workers should reject. Under the agreement struck between the company and the TWU, and endorsed by the judge, the new timetables will begin as planned. Busways management merely undertook to review any problems with the schedules once they were implemented—an empty pledge that the drivers have seen broken many times before.

Busways, a private family-controlled company, holds lucrative contracts with the state Labor government to provide general bus and school transport services across large areas of Sydney's western suburbs and in the New South Wales Central and North Coast regions. As part of its contracts, the terms of which are kept secret from the bus drivers and the public, the government pays for the company's new buses and for the training of new drivers.

The fact that the strike met such a concerted response raises decisive questions, not just for the bus drivers, but all workers. To defend even their most elementary rights and conditions today, workers confront the

opposition not just of the media, political and judicial establishment, but above all the trade union apparatus.

In one form or another, the employers, assured of backing by the state and federal Labor governments, are intent on using the economic crisis, and the resulting elimination of jobs and working hours, to speed up production, slash working conditions and lower real wages.

The drivers' strike demonstrates once again that the unions operate as enforcement agencies of the Labor governments and the employers, working to isolate and sell out workers, using Labor's anti-strike laws. Workers need to make a political break with the unions and develop their own rank-and-file committees and other independent organisations in order to fight this assault.

What is necessary is not just an industrial campaign, but a political struggle against the state and federal Labor governments and their pro-business agenda. To wage such a campaign, workers require a program that defends their class interests—a socialist perspective for the reorganisation of society based on social need, not corporate profit.

Reflecting on the lessons of the drivers' strike, a Blacktown driver told the WSWs: "We were fighting the company and the government—they are all in bed together—and the union is useless. The TWU is like the mafia, telling us that whatever we try to do, it is illegal.

"Every union has become like a business. And there is no difference between Labor and Liberal; they just go about things in different ways.

"When the company walked out of talks over the new timetables, we hit an emotional pain threshold. It was the kind of incident that you see causing revolutions.

"We tried all avenues before going on strike. The union has been in and out of the Industrial Relations Commission for years over the timetables. By going back to the Commission, it is the same old rubbish.

"My grievance is that we are still suffering from the

previous timetable. The route times have stayed the same, even though there are now slower speed limits on streets, as well as new speed humps and roundabouts. Most of the time, I can't meet the schedule.

"In the 10 years that I have been there, the company has never fixed one occurrence (complaint). For the company, every minute on the schedule is money—that's what it's all about! We are expected to drive for five hours without a break, even though the government's own road safety campaign says, "Stop, Revive and Survive" after two hours.

"Everything is being done to stump the drivers. Now the company has promised to fix problems up once the timetables commence. This is a farce and a smokescreen. The only thing the company has spent up big on is supposed security. They have installed GPS systems in every bus, which are really about monitoring the drivers every minute."

The driver spoke bitterly about the poor pay and conditions. For driving large buses, often crammed with people, through heavy traffic, as well as collecting fares and dealing with passengers, the drivers are paid a base rate of just \$21 an hour. They regularly work broken shifts, morning and afternoon, and only receive penalty rates for weekend and late-night shifts.

"During my 10 years, the company has gone through more than 1,000 drivers. It has every incentive to get rid of them because it is subsidised by the government to train new drivers, as well as to buy new buses. The company gets the money for new buses, but they can't afford to fix broken fans for drivers, and our toilets at the bus interchange are like the Third World.

"For striking, we were all docked at least four hours' pay, even though many of us were only due to start work just before the strike ended. It is typical of the malice in the management."



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