

# Australia: Union cuts short NSW bus drivers' strike

**Terry Cook**  
**22 December 2009**

A 24-hour strike by 3,700 government bus drivers in Sydney and Newcastle erupted last Friday, but was cut short by the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) after the union accepted an industrial tribunal ruling to negotiate on measures to impose the state Labor government's demands for cuts to drivers' jobs and conditions.

The union called off the strike after a lunchtime hearing in the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), which emphasised that the government's last-minute offer of a 6 percent pay rise over two years was conditional on "a number of savings initiatives"—particularly greater use of casual drivers.

Bus drivers decided to strike after the State Transit Authority (STA) refused, despite six rounds of negotiations over six months, to offer any pay increase in excess of the government's 2.5 percent annual ceiling on all public service pay rises, and demanded trade offs for any higher amount.

The union had sought to call the strike off altogether but the STA refused to allow drivers to attend a union meeting to consider the belated 6 percent offer. RTBU division secretary Raul Baonza publicly apologised for the strike, saying it was a "sign of the ongoing frustrations transport workers have with this government".

Drivers struck in defiance of the government, which whipped up public opposition to the stoppage. Recently-installed Premier Kristina Keneally condemned the strike as "unwarranted" and "unnecessary," claiming that "in the current economic climate" the government "has made a fair and generous offer".

In reality, the 6 percent "offer" made on the eve of the strike will barely keep pace with the official inflation rate, which is already rising. At the same, the government is demanding that the drivers pay for the 0.5 percent in excess of its wage ceiling through substantial cuts to working conditions.

These measures include a reduction in carer's leave entitlements, reclassifications of bus yard jobs and the further elimination of full-time jobs through increasing use of casuals, in particular to fill planned and unplanned absences by permanent and part-time drivers.

For decades, the drivers, like other public sector workers, have suffered staff cuts, increased workloads and speed-ups, including through cuts to turn-around times and reduced rest breaks.

By shutting down the strike and accepting the IRC ruling, the union has established the framework for behind closed-door horse-trading that will result in offsets acceptable to the STA and the government. According to the IRC judgment, the only sticking point preventing an agreement with the union is the demand for the lifting of the limitation on using casual drivers.

Under the interim ruling, the RTBU and STA are scheduled to return to the IRC on January 13 to report on progress in "good faith" negotiations. If no agreement is struck by February 26, the tribunal will "arbitrate on and determine the employee related cost savings to fund the wage increase". In the meantime, the IRC has barred all industrial action. Thus the union's acceptance of the ruling will tie the hands of

the bus drivers until late February at least.

The RTBU has never had any intention of opposing the government's pay ceiling and demands for "cost savings". It was the first union to accept the government's pay policy in July last year when it called off threatened industrial action by rail workers during the Catholic World Youth Day celebrations in Sydney.

After blocking the rail strike, the union rushed into closed-door meetings with the government and the State Rail Authority to begin identifying job cuts to gain "productivity credits". This involved the elimination of positions through the transfer of staff made "surplus to requirements" by ticketing machines and other cost-cutting measures.

At the time, Transport Minister John Watkins voiced his satisfaction with the outcome, declaring the government had withdrawn its demand for immediate job cuts, "only on agreement that the parties commit to a wage offer of 2.5 percent, and that any increases above that are subject to productivity improvements".

The operation carried out by the RTBU against the rail workers has since become the *modus operandi* pursued by public sector unions to stifle all opposition to the government's cuts to pay and working conditions.

Earlier this month, the New South Wales Teachers Federation cut short stoppages by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers in order to seek a "negotiated settlement" with the government after the IRC ruled that, in return for a pay rise, TAFE teachers must increase their weekly teaching load by five hours, work anytime from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. and teach "excess" hours over their allocated annual workload.

The unions are cynically using limited industrial action as a means of letting off steam, and as political leverage to come to an accommodation with the state government in order to deliver its demands. Earlier this month, the state's peak union body, Unions NSW, announced that it would draft a new accord, entitled *Working Together*, with the Keneally government.

Unions NSW secretary Mark Lennon declared that despite "differences with government" there was "genuine scope for us to work in closer co-operation with the state government to minimise those tensions". Put more plainly, the unions will step up their efforts to suppress all resistance to the government's cost cutting agenda—with bus drivers and TAFE teachers first in the firing line.

The Labor government is seeking to make workers pay for the impact of the global financial crisis, which has produced a predicted \$1 billion deficit in the state budget this financial year. It is also slashing social spending to finance corporate tax breaks. These include cutting the state payroll tax from 5.75 percent to 5.5 percent by the beginning of 2011, saving business an estimated \$2.7 billion over the next five years.

These measures are part of the broader agenda of the federal Rudd Labor government to utilise the economic crisis to restructure workers' conditions and restore corporate profits. At the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting in Brisbane on December 7 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reiterated his support for the NSW government's budget-cutting measures.

To defend even their most basic conditions, bus drivers, teachers and other public sector workers must take matters out of the control of the trade unions and develop a unified political struggle against the pro-market program of the Rudd and Keneally governments and their union enforcers.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**