

Sydney bus drivers strike against privatisation

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Public bus drivers in parts of Sydney, Australia's most populous city, carried out a 24-hour strike yesterday, opposing an announcement by the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government on Tuesday that it would privatise the operations of the bus services in the city's inner-west and south.

The move is part of a broader agenda, imposed by successive Labor and Coalition governments, of turning over transport, healthcare and other essential services to profiteering corporate entities.

As many as 1,200 drivers took part in the industrial action from depots in the inner-western suburbs of Leichhardt, Tempe, Kingsgrove and Burwood. They defied orders by the state's Industrial Relations Commission banning the strike.

The corporate press cynically bemoaned the inconvenience to commuters. Transport Minister Andrew Constance provocatively declared the strike amounted to "anarchy." This morning, the state government launched Supreme Court legal action over the stoppage against the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), which covers public bus drivers.

The strike is an expression of a broader sentiment among bus drivers and other transport workers to fight back against the corporate-dictated dismantling of public transport, and worsening working conditions.

However, a stop-work meeting called by the RTBU yesterday underscored the union's willingness to collaborate in further attacks on transport workers, including through privatisation. The event, near NSW Parliament, was attended by around 200 bus drivers.

Chris Preston, head of the union's bus division, denounced Constance for failing to "consult" with the union before announcing the privatisation plan. He appealed to the state's premier, Gladys Berejiklian to "step in, because under her watch, this would not have

happened. She was the shadow transport minister for a long time and then the minister for transport. She knew how to talk to the union."

In reality, moves to privatise inner-city bus services have long been under discussion and were reported in the corporate press throughout 2016. As transport minister, Berejiklian initiated the privatisation of Sydney's ferry services in 2012.

Preston declared that Constance's announcement was a "betrayal" of an enterprise bargaining agreement covering drivers for the next five years. In fact, the union-brokered deal, signed last December, went hand in hand with an announcement that the State Transit Authority (STA), which operates bus services, would eliminate 200 jobs, or 40 percent of all staff in its salaried division, including office and support workers.

Preston referenced the unions' collaboration in the job-shedding, stating: "Us working with the STA in the restructure? The minister's just thrown that out the window."

Preston commented on the privatisation of bus services in the regional city of Newcastle last year, and postured as an opponent of the resulting rise in casual and insecure employment for drivers. Last December, however, the union "cautiously welcomed" the state government's announcement of a 10-year agreement with Keolis Downer, a major private operator, to run Newcastle buses, ferries and a new light rail line.

Preston's comments, and the record of the union, make clear that the RTBU's current rhetoric against the privatisation is window-dressing, which will be dispensed with if the government agrees to hold talks. The union's primary concern is to maintain its own privileged position at the negotiating table, where it bargains away the rights and conditions of workers. The RTBU is particularly fearful that if inner-west

services are privatised, bus drivers will be covered by the rival Transport Workers Union, depriving it of hundreds of dues-paying members.

The RTBU's fawning overtures to the state government contrasted with the sentiments of the gathered bus drivers. One, with 10 years' experience, told the WSWs: "I don't know if you can run the buses for a profit. The main reason they're giving is that we're always late. But the issue is Sydney congestion. I can't see private buses doing any better.

"It's all about private companies taking over and the big end of town coming in," he continued. "I think we'll lose some of our conditions if it goes through. Labor has privatised plenty of things. They all look after the big end of town."

Another driver, who has worked for eight years, said: "Privatisation would make our lives completely uncertain. We've made all of our decisions based on our previous contracts—getting personal loans and house loans. Now we don't know what our future is going to be. We would still have the same traffic, the same equipment. How is privatisation going to solve that?"

Speaking on the conditions already facing drivers, he commented: "It's a lot of pressure at the moment to meet the timetabling requirements. The congestion in Sydney is just getting worse. It's not only the drivers, we're also concerned about the public and safety."

Other drivers spoke on the difficulties of working split shifts, in the mornings and late-afternoons, with three-hour breaks in the middle of the day.

A number of drivers denounced claims that Labor represents an alternative to the privatisation plans of the government. NSW Labor governments, in office from 1995 to 2011, spearheaded the sell-off of state assets, including the electricity distribution network. Large areas of bus services were also operated by private corporations throughout Labor's tenure, with companies receiving substantial government funding, and making use of public infrastructure, while extracting profits.

In 2004, the Labor government of Bob Carr commissioned a review into Sydney's bus network, carried out by a former Labor premier, Barry Unsworth. The review called for the adoption of a "demand driven approach," as opposed to one based on "minimum service levels." In effect, this meant the gutting of many bus services in working class areas of western

Sydney, particularly outside peak hours.

The Unsworth review also called for an expansion of services run by private operators. Carr declared that the overhaul would "mesh private and public bus services for the first time."

A report by the auditor-general into the operations of private bus companies with state contracts in 2010 found that the Labor government was focused on "contract administration"—that is, dispensing large sums of public money to for-profit entities—and that the services provided were woefully inadequate.

The report found that 25 percent of private bus commuters were stranded at least once a week by a bus that did not arrive. A third were unable to travel because there were no services in their area. In its 2010 budget, the Labor government of Kristina Keneally allocated \$759 million to private bus companies with state contracts in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

Since 2010, the state's transport crisis has only deepened, with infrastructure failing to keep pace with population growth. The situation is a direct product of the subordination of social needs, including for decent, reliable transport, to the profit motives of the major corporations. The RTBU's central role in enforcing this agenda underscores the need for an independent political and industrial struggle by bus drivers, and other transport workers.



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