

New Zealand bus workers threatened with pay and job cuts

Our correspondents
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Bus workers in New Zealand's capital city are facing major attacks by a private operator contracted by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) to slash running costs and boost profits.

The GWRC has chosen Tranzit Group as its preferred bidder to run eight bus contracts, or 60 percent of the capital's bus services. Current operator NZ Bus will go from running 73 to 28 percent of routes. Around 380 workers will switch to the new employer and job cuts could be imposed as part of the takeover.

Although no formal agreement has been drawn up, Tranzit has indicated that it intends to cut wages for Wellington drivers by abolishing weekend and late night penalty rates when the 2018 contract starts. A senior driver receiving \$19.35 an hour Monday to Friday can currently get \$29 an hour (time-and-a-half rates) on Saturdays and \$38.70 an hour (double time) on Sundays.

Tranzit managing director Paul Snelgrove said on June 14 the company would pay bus drivers \$22 an hour, "well above the current hourly rate" under NZ Bus. However, the extra \$2.65 would not compensate for the loss of weekend rates.

The GWRC is dominated by former Labour and Green Party parliamentarians. It is implementing the National Party government's "public transport operating model," which commenced in 2013, to promote privatisation to drive down costs and boost profits for private companies. GWRC chair Chris Laidlaw has said the council intends to save millions of dollars through the deal with Tranzit.

The WSWS spoke with a NZ Bus driver who has decades of experience. He described Tranzit's takeover as "the biggest threat we've ever faced." Even if drivers received \$22 an hour, which was not confirmed, "it's still a pay cut. A large percentage of drivers work

every hour they can. They work six days a week. I'd say those people would lose at least \$200 a week."

The driver did not trust the GWRC's claims that bus drivers would not be worse off. He said Tranzit was fighting a legal dispute with school bus drivers in the Wairarapa region to try to casualise the workforce to avoid giving drivers paid annual leave.

Drivers would be forced to work longer hours and more split shifts—working in the early morning and late evening—or take a second job to provide for their families, leading to increased fatigue and potential for accidents.

Bus drivers are already among the lowest paid workers in the country, earning little more than the legal minimum wage of \$15.75 an hour. The soaring cost of living, particularly for housing, has forced many drivers to live further away from the Wellington bus depot and travel long distances to get to work.

Wellington drivers were also concerned about safety: "You cut funding and have bus companies operating on less, they're going to be taking shortcuts on maintenance," the driver said. In 2013, a police operation led to 61 Wellington buses being ordered off the road because they were unsafe. The issues included oil leaks and toxic fumes that seeped into buses.

Big business and the government "don't expect people like bus drivers to have overseas holidays, to own a car, to own their own home. The attitude is: if you're a bus driver, suffer the consequences. It's no longer that anyone cares about a fair day's pay for a fair day's work or any of the old principles that New Zealand used to value."

In May, 300 Wellington bus workers who are members of the Tramways Union voted unanimously to refuse any employment agreement with Tranzit unless it maintained their present conditions (see also:

“Wellington transport workers face attacks on jobs and conditions”).

The unions, however, have no intention of organising a real fight to defend wages and conditions. Council of Trade Unions leader Richard Wagstaff suggested that the GWRC and Tranzit should reach an agreement similar to the council’s arrangement with commuter rail operator Transdev.

Wagstaff has glorified the conditions of rail workers under Transdev, which took over last year from Tranz Metro, a subsidiary of state-owned KiwiRail. He claimed that Transdev had maintained “the same or more favourable” conditions under an agreement with the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU).

In fact, the privatisation has led to inadequate staffing of trains, harsh new “performance” criteria for workers and a miserly pay increase of 2 percent last year (see also: “New Zealand rail union pushes pro-company collective agreement”).

The Tramways Union is seeking to subordinate drivers to the opposition Labour Party, despite the fact that Laidlaw and GWRC transport spokesman Paul Swain, who are organising the assault on drivers, are both former Labour MPs.

Labour leader Andrew Little appeared in a video, circulated on Facebook, criticising the GWRC for “trying to drive down the wages and conditions” of bus drivers.

In the 1980s, however, the Labour government privatised the rail system, resulting in thousands of redundancies. The Labour Party is a party of big business, just like National, and has overseen historic attacks on working people. If Labour wins the national election in September it will deepen the current government’s austerity agenda.

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Auckland Council, led by former Labour leader Phil Goff, has cut hundreds of jobs at libraries throughout the city and its transport agency is in discussions with Transdev and the RMTU to restructure the commuter rail system and cut up to 160 train manager jobs.

These cuts are part of a wave of redundancies and pro-business restructuring driven by the intensifying global economic crisis. This includes the closure of the Silver Fern Farms meat factory in Ashburton and the Cadbury chocolate factory in Dunedin, and cuts to postal,

mining and public sector jobs.

Transport workers internationally are coming into struggle against privatisation and other attacks as companies compete to slash costs. In recent months, thousands of bus drivers have taken strike action in Australia, Ireland, Germany and India.

In every case, the ruling elite is relying on the trade union bureaucracy to facilitate redundancies and other attacks on workers and to block any mobilisation of the working class against the capitalist system. Bus drivers can fight back only by rebelling against these nationalist and class-collaborationist organisations.

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) calls on bus drivers to form new workplace committees, in opposition to the unions. These need to fight to link the struggles of bus drivers with workers in rail and other industries in New Zealand and internationally, guided by a socialist perspective for the complete transformation of society. Major industries and essential services such as public transport must be nationalised and placed under the democratic control of the working class, run to meet human needs, not generate profits for a small handful of wealthy people.

The authors also recommend:

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