

Australia: Anger erupts over privatised bus services in Newcastle

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An estimated 1,000 people gathered at a public meeting on February 19 in the industrial city of Newcastle, two hours north of Sydney, expressing discontent and frustration over the privatisation of the city's buses. It was standing room only, with residents spilling outside the hall.

The meeting was held just days after the New South Wales (NSW) state government announced the extension of the bus privatisation program to inner-western Sydney. It handed a major contract to private operator, Transit Systems, deepening the attack on public transport services and workers across the state.

The Newcastle meeting was organised by the opposition Labor Party, with the support of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), in an effort to cover over their own role in the privatisation of the city's bus service and divert the hostility of the residents toward the re-election of another pro-business Labor government.

The meeting was called after numerous complaints surfaced over a new timetable in January that resulted in a further reduction in the reliability of services. One high school student told the meeting it now takes him one hour and 50 minutes to get to school in the morning and two hours and 15 minutes to get home. Yet his school is only a 40-minute drive from his house.

Bec Cassidy, who cannot drive due to a medical condition, said that the timetable change means she will have to send her daughter to another primary school for her final year.

The promised "on-demand" bus system was also condemned. A mother with a three-month-old son said she had ordered a bus for between 9am and 9:30am, four days before an important 10am appointment. She lives outside the "on-demand" area, so had to walk 20 minutes in the rain with her son to reach the bus stop,

only to receive a message at 9:02am that her bus was cancelled. It took numerous phone calls before a bus finally turned up at 9:45am.

In 2016, the state Liberal-National government awarded Keolis Downer, a joint venture between Keolis, a large French transport group, and Downer Rail, an Australian railway engineering company, a 10-year contract to run Newcastle's buses, ferries and a proposed light rail system. The consortium has been granted similar contracts across the country.

Since Keolis Downer took over the Newcastle operations last July there has been a sharp fall in on-time services. According to the company's own statistics, from July to November the proportion of on-time bus services dropped dramatically, from 95.24 percent to 79.08 percent. Mid-trip measurements fell from 86.92 percent to 51.93 percent.

This has particularly affected school children, university students, people with a disability and residents who cannot drive. Many people depend on the buses because Newcastle, Australia's seventh largest city, with nearly half a million people, has only two train lines, neither of which now reaches the city centre since the state government shut the downtown line in 2014.

The first official speaker, RTBU division secretary Chris Preston, told the meeting that bus drivers had been underpaid since Keolis Downer took over. This was in reference to media reports last August of around 70 drivers being underpaid. Some were owed \$200 from the previous fortnight, and others said they were underpaid \$600 in a month.

"From the drivers' point of view," Preston said, "the company has been in for eight months and we're still trying to get drivers paid for the hours they work." Preston finished his speech by appealing to Keolis

Downer management, declaring: “This company has to listen to the people, it has to listen to workers.”

The reality is that the trade union has played the key part in suppressing its members’ opposition to the privatisation. When the sell-off plans were announced in 2016, the RBTU released a statement saying it “cautiously welcomed” the news.

In the statement, Preston said: “It’s a great step forward for Newcastle transport workers who can now finally put a face to their future employer... We look forward to this being a positive project for the people of Newcastle and the Hunter, with smoother public transport integration and much needed revitalisation.”

The Labor Party’s claims to defend public transport are no less of a fraud. Addressing the meeting, state Labor Leader Luke Foley likened Newcastle’s public transport to that in a “third world country.” Yet he merely urged the government to conduct a “damn urgent review” of the transport system.

At the end of the meeting, Newcastle Labor MP Tim Crakanthorp proposed a motion to reject the timetable changes and call on Transport Minister Andrew Constance to conduct a review. Significantly, no call was made to oppose the bus privatisation itself.

While in office from 1996 to 2011, state Labor governments spearheaded the sale of state assets, including freight train operators and the electricity distribution network.

In 2004, Premier Bob Carr’s government commissioned a review of bus services statewide, conducted by former Labor Premier Barrie Unsworth. It recommended the expansion of private contractors, with lucrative government subsidies, in order to boost corporate profits while cutting jobs and costs.

The bus privatisations are part of a broader assault on the jobs and conditions of transport workers and the entire working class. The state government, working hand-in-glove with the RTBU, is currently trying to impose a new enterprise agreement on 9,000 NSW rail workers and Sydney train workers that will further erode basic conditions, destroy more jobs and pave the way for the contracting out of rail services.

The Newcastle meeting shows the potential for, and necessity of, a unified struggle by transport workers and passengers, and the entire working class, against this assault. That will require breaking out of the grip of the trade unions and Labor Party, which are working to

continue isolating and wearing down the struggles of bus and rail workers.

The author recommends:

Australia: NSW government privatises Sydney’s inner-west bus services
[16 February 2018]

Australian rail union prepares sellout in NSW train dispute
[2 March 2018]



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