

Australia: Victorian bus drivers strike over wages and conditions

Our reporters
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Nearly 500 bus drivers participated in two 24-hour strikes, today and on Tuesday, impacting 49 bus routes in Melbourne's western and eastern suburbs and 25 services in the regional Victorian cities of Ballarat and Geelong.

The stoppages are part of a dispute between the private bus company CDC Victoria and the Transport Workers Union (TWU), over a new Enterprise Agreement covering drivers for the next three years.

The strikes are the first significant industrial action by bus drivers in Victoria in around 20 years. More than 90 percent of unionised drivers voted in favour of the stoppages. Large numbers took part in protests in Wyndham, Oakleigh, Geelong, and Ballarat on Tuesday.

The TWU is demanding a wage increase of four percent per year as well as a one percent increase in superannuation entitlements. CDC Victoria has offered a paltry 2.5 percent wage rise per annum.

Bus drivers who spoke to WSWs reporters outlined a number of their grievances, including low wages that have not kept up with the rising cost of living, long shifts beginning early in the morning, often forcing workers to leave their homes at 3.00 a.m., and stressful situations involving abusive passengers and unresolved health and safety concerns.

The TWU's claim that a wage rise of just four percent would be "fair" is absurd. This would represent on average a \$45.00 per week increase, which would be eaten up by the increased cost of essential items.

For instance, fuel increased by more than \$200 per household last year, while there was a 3.4 percent increase in health costs, along with hikes in home and car insurance. Basic commodities such as fruit increased by around 9 percent and secondary school costs also rose by more than four percent. A recent report by the Grattan Institute revealed that electricity prices went up by 130 percent from 2015–2017 only to rise again by 20 percent last year.

The deepening cuts to bus drivers' living standards are a product of the expanded privatisation of transport services, enforced by successive Labor and Liberal-National state

governments and the unions. While drivers' wages have stagnated, and conditions have worsened, the TWU has suppressed any industrial or political struggle by bus drivers and other transport workers.

CDC Victoria epitomises the transformation of essential transport from a government-provided service available to all, to a lucrative, for-profit industry.

The company is a branch of ComfortDelGro, one of the largest land transport companies in the world, with operations in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Singapore, Australia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and 11 cities across China. It maintains a fleet of over 42,500 vehicles. The transport giant had an operational profit of \$409 million last year.

ComfortDelGro moved into the Australian market in 2005, when it acquired the Westbus Group, then the largest private bus operator in New South Wales. It expanded into Victoria in 2009 by taking over Kefford Corporation's companies.

To oppose such a massive entity requires the broadest mobilisation of transport workers throughout Victoria, and across the country.

The TWU is bitterly hostile to this perspective. It has confined industrial action to limited stoppages involving only CDC Victoria employees. The TWU has sought to block any unified struggle involving bus drivers and transport workers in other private entities, who face similar attacks, and in the public sector, where governments have carried out a decades-long cost-cutting operation.

At the same time, the union has made clear that it is seeking to push through a sell-out deal in back-room discussions with the company.

The role of the TWU mirrors the actions of its counterparts in other states. Last year, the Rail, Train and Bus Union (RTBU) facilitated the privatisation of a number of bus routes across Sydney, in the face of widespread opposition among drivers. It had earlier enforced the New South Wales (NSW) state government's sell-off of lucrative ferry operations.

Early this year, the RTBU prevented a strike by thousands of NSW train workers, and pushed through an enterprise

bargaining agreement mandating job reductions, and further cuts to conditions.

The TWU, like every other union, is a thoroughly corporatised entity that operates as an industrial police force of governments and employers.

A 2015 Royal Commission revealed that from 2000 to 2007, the TWU in NSW received \$1.4 million in payments directly from employers, through an entity it established, the Transport Industry Training Education and Industry Rights Fund (see: “What the Royal Commission into Australia’s trade unions revealed”).

In its submission to the commission in 2014, Toll an \$8 billion logistics company, acknowledged paying \$150,000 to a TWU fund every year. It declared that the “primary motive” was to “achieve industrial peace.”

In Victoria, the TWU established the Transport, Logistics, Advocacy and Training Association, of which John Berger, the assistant secretary of the union’s Victoria/Tasmania branch was treasurer.

The Association held two major fundraisers in 2010 and 2012. The first such function, a \$500 a head affair, generated over \$90,000. Attending were companies that dealt with the TWU including CDC Victoria, which purchased \$5,000 worth of tickets.

In 2012, 160 guests attended a union gala that gathered \$80,000 prior to costs. CDC Victoria was present. In other words, the TWU leadership was dining with, and receiving money from, the companies it claims to oppose.

The record highlights the fact that bus drivers can only go forward through a complete break with the TWU. New organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees are required, to break the isolation imposed by the unions, and unite workers across the transport sector in a common struggle against the assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

The subordination of transport, and every aspect of social life, to the profit interests of corporations such as CDC Victoria, underscores the need for a socialist perspective, aimed at placing transport, along with the banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

WSWS reporters spoke to striking bus drivers about the issues they confront on Tuesday.

Vanco said: “I’m worried about the engine retarder system, the braking system to stop the buses. At my depot there are problems with several buses, but they won’t fix it because it costs money.

“About 90 out of every 120 drivers get injuries in a year, because you sit there for hours in the seat. They don’t care and they say there is nothing wrong and keep going. They say they can’t afford to buy the parts. Four percent is

nothing to them.

Goce commented that, “All the transport industries, like trams and trains, get more money than us. We are dealing with the public and collecting fares. We are doing two jobs. We should all be paid the same in the transport industry.

“The company wanted split shifts. That would mean a three-hour break in the middle of our shift. We didn’t agree with this and it was taken off the table. When we used to work 12 hours, we would get a 16-hour break. Now, when we work 11 hours, we only get a 12-hour break. They are lessening all our breaks.

“The 2.5 percent wage increase amounts to around eight cents an hour. Four percent is not enough. We are not asking for much. We are not asking for 30 or 40 percent. We are going backwards, they want to make profits on our wages. What are you going to buy for eight cents?”

Nirav said: “We thought the company would accept what was offered. We felt we had to draw a line. It isn’t that people don’t want to work. I have to get up at 3 a.m. and finish at 2 p.m. You drive all day and then you are on the road for an hour to get home. It isn’t easy. It is a hard job.

George stated: “This is our first industrial action for 20 years. They should give us what we need. We have given up a lot and now it is becoming unreasonable. They are pushing us so much. Our shifts are being tightened, there is no more buffering time if your bus is running late.

“Now we have so much traffic on the road and it is so easy to run late. You have no toilet break and yet they are cutting our wages. With all the traffic and lack of infrastructure, the passengers get mad at us because they don’t understand what we face.

“Some of us are working 11 hours a day. We have families. The company just wants more and more. All they care about is the shareholders. We are just getting less and less. We are taking industrial action to let them know that we are not pushovers.”



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