

New Zealand bus drivers take action over work rosters

Our correspondents
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Bus drivers in the Hutt Valley, adjacent to New Zealand's capital city Wellington, launched partial strike action on Monday over new work rosters, with some rostered on for more than 14 hours and not getting paid breaks.

About 50 drivers cut their hours to a standard eight-hour day, instead of their full rostered shifts. Tramways Union secretary Kevin O'Sullivan said the action would continue every day to force bus company Tranzit "to start talking to us about a collective agreement."

The Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) launched a revamped operation for the region's bus network on July 15. A new bus fleet, altered timetables and restructured fares are being used to ramp up private profits through reduced services and attacks on workers' wages, jobs and conditions.

Last year the GWRC, which is dominated by former Labour and Green Party parliamentarians, chose Tranzit Group as its preferred private operator to run eight bus contracts that cover 60 percent of the region's routes, including services in the Hutt Valley and Porirua.

About 100,000 bus trips are taken each week in Wellington. In its first week of operation, the new services have been described as a "fiasco." Buses have run late, some not showing up at all. Real-time tracking failed to work as expected. The council's public transport agency Metlink tweeted that it was dealing with "teething issues."

Drivers are working under intolerable conditions. Many are doing 70-hour weeks. A roster sent to Fairfax Media shows multiple shifts with excessively long hours. One shift starts at 5.38am and ends at 7.19pm—nearly 14 hours. The driver involved covers 11 different bus routes and has only brief breaks between services. Drivers are not paid for meal breaks and long

split-shift interruptions. The company can change shifts at short notice on a "daily basis."

When the GWRC awarded the contract to Tranzit, many drivers refused to sign up under the new employment conditions. The company foreshadowed that it would cut wages by abolishing late night, weekend, overtime and public holiday penalty rates. NZ Bus, the previous operator, paid drivers a base rate of between \$18.65 and \$19.35 an hour, just above the minimum wage of \$16.50. Tranzit's new rate of \$22 an hour does not compensate for lost penalty rates.

O'Sullivan said NZ Bus made 240 bus drivers redundant. Workers had to reapply with Tranzit for their jobs. The union released documents revealing that the company unsuccessfully tried to work with the Ministry of Social Development to recruit unemployed people to fill 200 drivers' jobs. O'Sullivan said Tranzit had finally "agreed to talk" over contract negotiations but a deal for the drivers had "failed to materialise."

According to a GWRC-commissioned report, drivers with less than five years' experience would be "better off" under Tranzit but those with more than five years' experience would be disadvantaged. Tranzit managing director Paul Snelgrove dismissed the union's claims about pay and work hours as "false" but attacked workers who had relied on penalty rates, saying they "hog overtime" and declared "they're obviously free to choose not to join us."

The unions have responded, not by mobilising workers in an industrial and political campaign against the company and the Labourites but with the current limited stoppages, intent on striking a deal with the company.

At a public event involving Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in April, Manufacturing and Construction Workers Union advocate Graham Clark declared that

drivers would set up pickets this month to prevent Tranzit buses from leaving the depots. Wellington commuters would have to “get used to walking,” Clark warned.

This proved to be hot air. O’Sullivan told the WSWs on July 11 drivers had “not yet” been balloted for strike action. Wellington city drivers have not been called out. Instead, the Tramways Union last week lodged a formal complaint with the police, saying the rosters are a “significant safety issue” and breach the Land Transport Act and Employment Relations Act.

The drivers’ action is part of an upsurge by transport workers internationally, with strikes in the US, Britain and Australia, usually against opposition from union bureaucrats. As New Zealand workers, including nurses and public servants mount strikes over wages, the unions are working to isolate, wear down and sell out their struggles while defending the Labour-led government.

Labour MPs earlier feigned concern over the drivers. At the unveiling of new buses on July 5, Environment Minister David Parker made mild criticisms of the GWRC “pushing down” drivers’ wages. Labour MP and parliament’s speaker, Trevor Mallard, rejected his invitation to the event, demagogically describing it as a celebration of lost jobs “for my poorest neighbours.” The posturing was all for show. As education minister in the 1999-2008 Labour government, Mallard oversaw a sweeping school closure program, including in his own electorate, shedding hundreds of jobs.

The Labour Party has a long track record of attacking workers. In the 1980s the Lange Labour government began privatising the rail system, which the bus services were then part of, resulting in thousands of redundancies. Private bus companies like Stagecoach and Tranzit flourished in the 1990s.

Labour is now pushing ahead with new Fair Pay Agreements (FPAs), through a “working-group” led by former National Party Prime Minister Jim Bolger, who created the anti-worker 1991 Employment Contracts Act. The Tramways Union has praised the FPAs, which threaten the near total banning of strikes and reinforce the unions as industrial police.

The assault on bus drivers has been prepared by previous company-union attacks in rail. The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) recently re-entered contract negotiations with Transdev and Hyundai

Rotem (THR), the private operators contracted by the GWRC in 2016 to run Wellington’s passenger rail service.

A new collective agreement was rammed through by the RMTU using an anti-democratic secret ballot in which unreturned voting papers were counted in favour of the pro-company deal. Recently, a number of passenger operators lost their jobs. Some have taken “voluntary” redundancy, while others have been forced to accept either part-time positions or full-time jobs with loss of penalty rates.



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