

# Australia: Victorian bus drivers to strike over pay and conditions

Oscar Grenfell  
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Up to 1,000 bus drivers in the Australian state of Victoria are set to take 24-hour strike action tomorrow, in opposition to the attempts by private transport companies CDC Victoria and Transdev to suppress wages and maintain onerous conditions in new enterprise workplace agreements.

The stoppage is only the third full-day strike by Victorian bus drivers in more than 20 years, following two 24-hour strikes by CDC drivers last month. It is just one expression of mounting opposition among transport workers across the country to the consequences of a privatisation agenda that has been enforced by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), however, has called the strike in a bid to let off steam and to prevent a genuine struggle against the company demands. Throughout the disputes, the TWU has sought to limit industrial action to sporadic and limited stoppages at CDC Victoria. It called off earlier strikes to facilitate negotiations with the company for a back-room agreement that would not have resolved any of the issues facing drivers.

The strike has also sparked fear in the corporate and financial elite, which is concerned that it could become the focal point of a broader movement of the working class in opposition to stagnating wages and the corporate onslaught on working conditions. Enterprise agreements are currently being negotiated at other transport companies, including Dysons and Ventura, raising the prospect of further industrial action.

The Fairfax Media-owned *Age* and other corporate papers have cynically sought to set the public against the drivers, warning that the stoppage will cause widespread delays and travel disruptions for hundreds of thousands of people throughout Melbourne.

The prospect of widespread disruption is an indication of the extent to which public transport services have been

turned over to major private companies. Up to 120 routes across the state will be affected, including 46 in Melbourne, accounting for around 30 percent of the metropolitan bus network. Services in the regional centres of Ballarat and Geelong will also be hit.

CDC Victoria is an Australian subsidiary of global transport company ComfortDelGrow, which recorded an operational profit of \$409 million last year. It is demanding that bus drivers accept a new enterprise agreement mandating an annual pay rise of just 2.5 percent per annum over three years.

CDC Victoria has offered nothing to address the issues confronting drivers, including health and safety concerns, lengthy shifts starting before dawn and passenger abuse.

Transdev is the Australian branch of the global transport giant of the same name. It operates publicly owned transport systems in 20 countries and employs over 80,000 workers. The company had a revenue of €6.6 billion last financial year.

Like CDC Victoria, Transdev is demanding that workers accept a 2.5 percent wage increase per year, barely in line with the official rate of inflation.

The TWU has responded by calling for the introduction of an industry-wide fixed pay rise of four percent per annum. The union's insistence that this would be a "fair" alternative to existing pay arrangements, based on Victorian Average Weekly Earnings figures, is a sham. The union claim would be an increase of just one percent on the three percent annual pay rise that has prevailed in the industry for 20 years.

The TWU's pay demand, if accepted by the company, would impose a three-year wage ceiling, which would be invoked to prevent any further push by workers for increased pay. It would not keep pace with the rapidly rising cost of living, amid soaring housing and utility costs.

The union has repeatedly made clear that it is prepared

to sign sell-out deals with both transport companies. At the last minute, the TWU called off a four-hour strike of CDC Victoria drivers scheduled for July 27, amid closed-door “mediation” with the company. The union has since imposed an effective ban on any industrial action, despite overwhelming endorsement of further stoppages among workers.

A statement by TWU Victoria announcing tomorrow’s strike declared that “in a sign of good faith,” the union had “lifted all work bans and proposed stoppages for the past two weeks in an attempt to come to an acceptable agreement.”

The statement said that the TWU “had been encouraged by the positive progress of talks with CDC” and lamented that they had broken down. TWU national-vice president John Berger stated that the “matter had come close to a resolution and we remain available to speak with all parties.”

In other words, the union is desperately seeking to cobble together a deal and prevent a broader confrontation between transport workers, the major companies and the state Labor government, which provides the lucrative contracts to operate public transport.

This is in line with the role of the transport unions across the country. In January, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) enforced a ban on a state-wide strike of New South Wales (NSW) rail workers, imposed by the federal industrial tribunal, the Fair Work Commission. It then imposed a regressive enterprise agreement mandating continuous restructures and providing for forced redundancies.

The NSW RTBU had previously enforced the privatisation of the state’s ferry operations, and backed the handing over of public transport operations in the regional hub of Newcastle to Keolis Downer, another major transport company.

The TWU is no less of a corporatised, pro-business entity. The 2015 Royal Commission into union corruption established that the TWU had, over the previous decade, received substantial funding from the logistics and transportation companies that it now claims to be waging a struggle against.

In Victoria, Berger was the head of a union-created Transport, Logistics, Advocacy and Training Association, which held corporate fundraisers in 2010 and 2012, raising \$130,000 in revenue for the unions, including through ticket sales to companies such as CDC Victoria.

The TWU also collaborates closely with the Labor Party, which has been a principal architect of the

privatisation of transport. In New South Wales, state Labor governments in the 1990s spearheaded the expansion of contracts for private bus services, while initiating a sweeping overhaul of the public rail system, which included the destruction of thousands of jobs and the closure of dozens of workshops and facilities.

The Victorian Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews sought to tap into anger over transport privatisation earlier this year. It threatened to place limited restrictions in new contracts, which would have enabled the government to buy back aspects of transport infrastructure.

Making clear that the posturing was all for show, Andrews backflipped after a hysterical public campaign by the major operators.

In June, the government outlined new seven-year contract offers, which guaranteed “no end-of-term access to staff, depots, fleet and IP (intellectual property).” This will ensure that previously privatised transport infrastructure and operations remain in the hands of major corporations for the foreseeable future. The Victorian Bus Association responded with a statement declaring that the private operators were “very pleased” with the offer.

The record demonstrates that the fight for decent transport jobs and conditions requires a break with Labor and the unions. New organisations of struggle are needed, including independent rank-and-file committees, to break the isolation imposed by the unions and coordinate a unified political and industrial fightback by all transport workers across the country.

The bus drivers’ strike poses the necessity of a new political perspective, which rejects the subordination of transport and other essential services to the profit dictates of a tiny corporate and financial elite. This means the fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing transport, along with the banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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