

Australia: Transport union cancels Victorian bus drivers strike

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The Transport Workers Union (TWU) issued a statement on Wednesday night, unilaterally cancelling a 24-hour strike of up to 1,000 bus drivers across the Australian state of Victoria, which had been slated to occur the following day.

The union has also declared its support for a new enterprise agreement covering employees of Transdev and CDC Victoria, the private transport operators that were set to be hit by the strike. The deal would cap annual pay rises at a paltry 4 percent, and would not resolve any of the issues confronting drivers.

The TWU's suppression of the stoppage was the outcome of a sordid back-room conspiracy, involving the union, the companies and the Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

The strike would have been the first joint full-day industrial action in Victoria, involving drivers at two private transport companies, in more than 20 years. Two 24-hour strikes by CDC drivers last month were the first in decades.

The Labor government and the union were deeply fearful that Thursday's strike could have become the focal point of a broader movement of the working class, against stagnating wages and a corporate onslaught on working conditions.

The TWU has stated that talks with other private bus operators, Ventura and Dyson, are "progressing in good faith"—a signal that it will also seek to suppress any industrial or political struggles by drivers at those companies.

In an indication of a widespread anger among drivers, more than 90 percent of Transdev workers had voted to endorse the strike, with a similar proportion of CDC drivers backing rolling industrial action.

The TWU, in defiance of the vote, entered into secret discussions with the Andrews government on Tuesday.

TWU state secretary John Berger met with Transport Minister Jacinta Allan and Treasurer Tim Pallas to hatch a plan for cancelling the stoppage. Berger later described the meeting as "productive," without giving any details of the discussion.

The Labor government brokered the resumption of talks between the TWU and both private companies on Wednesday, leading to the rapid announcement that the strike was off.

The Labor government has previously intervened in a series of industrial disputes, with the full support of the unions, to illegalise strikes and other industrial action on the pretext that it would have an adverse impact on the population and the state economy. It blocked stoppages by workers in the energy sector, and other strategic industries.

The speed with which the strike was called off makes clear that the TWU never wanted it to occur. In the days leading up to the stoppage, Berger issued a series of public statements, lamenting that the strike would disrupt commuters.

The union was well aware that an appeal to commuters and other workers to support the strike, would have won powerful support. A May stop work rally in Melbourne, called by the unions as part of their pro-Labor "Change the rules" campaign, was attended by an estimated 100,000 workers. The unions are seeking to prevent any similar mobilisation for fear that it could rapidly develop out of their control.

The union's claim of being in a fight with the companies over wages was a carefully orchestrated pantomime. While Transdev and CDC Victoria had demanded wage increases be capped at 2.5 percent per annum, the union had called for a 4 percent rise per year.

Berger said, however, that the companies had "low-

balled” with their initial offer. In other words, the initial offer had been designed to allow the unions to strike a militant posture, and to declare, once a deal was done, that they had “won” a marginally higher pay increase.

This is precisely what has transpired. Berger hailed the 4 percent wage offer, along with a one-off \$1,800 lump sum superannuation payment.

In reality, the pay rise is well below the rapidly rising cost of living, amid soaring housing and utility costs. The increase will amount to an average of just \$45 per week for low-paid drivers who have had average wage increases of just 3 percent per annum over the past two decades.

The TWU is effectively seeking to enforce a wage ceiling that it will invoke to prevent any further push by workers for improved pay over the next three years. This is a graphic expression of the role of all the unions in maintaining stagnant, or declining wages. Average wage growth fell to its lowest recorded level last financial year, of just 1.9 percent.

Moreover, the TWU has not even pretended that an agreement will resolve the onerous conditions workers confront, including long shifts that begin before dawn, unresolved health and safety issues and abuse from passengers.

The role of the TWU, as an industrial police force of the Labor government and the corporations, parallels the actions of transport unions across the country.

In January, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) enforced a ban on a strike by up to 9,000 train drivers across New South Wales, imposed by the federal industrial tribunal, the Fair Work Commission. The RTBU then pushed through an enterprise agreement mandating continuous restructuring, forced redundancies and the ever-greater corporatisation of nominally state-owned rail services.

The sell-out followed decades of RTBU collaboration with state governments, in the destruction of thousands of rail jobs and the shuttering of dozens of workshops and facilities. The union also enforced the privatisation of lucrative Sydney ferry operations, and “cautiously welcomed” the privatisation of transport services in Newcastle, a major regional centre.

In Victoria, the TWU has suppressed any industrial or political struggle against the ever-greater subordination of public transport to the profit dictates of the major

corporations. CDC Victoria and Transdev, which are the Australian branches of massive multinational entities, operate up to 30 percent of metropolitan bus services in Melbourne.

The union collaborates closely with the corporations, along with the big business Labor Party. This was expressed most graphically by two corporate fundraisers held by the TWU’s Transport, Logistics, Advocacy and Training Association, in 2010 and 2012, which netted \$130,000 in revenue for the union, including through ticket sales to CDC Victoria.

The record demonstrates that drivers can only fight for improved wages and conditions through a complete break with the corporatised unions. A campaign must be initiated to defy the union-brokered agreement, and for the largest possible “no” vote in upcoming ballots to ratify it.

New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required to break the isolation imposed by the unions, and coordinate an industrial and political campaign involving workers across the transport industry.

Such a struggle requires a new political perspective, which rejects the subordination of transport and every aspect of social life, to the profit dictates of the 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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