

New Zealand: Wellington bus drivers vote for indefinite strike

Our correspondent
4 October 2018

Wellington bus drivers voted last week to strike from October 23 if private bus companies, Tranzit Group and Uzabus, fail to conclude a new collective agreement with the Tramways Union.

Off-peak commuter services in Wellington, Hutt Valley and Porirua were cancelled as drivers held a stopwork meeting on September 26, following months of unsuccessful negotiations. More than 230 voted in favour of the proposed strike, with only three voting against.

The meeting declared no-confidence in the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), the body responsible for awarding contracts to the bus companies. The GWRC, led by former Labour and Green Party MPs, handed over 60 percent of the region's bus routes to Tranzit, while previous bus operator NZ Bus had its share of services reduced to 28 percent. Uzabus took over buses in nearby Kapiti.

Transport workers are joining other sections of the working class, including nurses, public servants and teachers, to oppose more than a decade of austerity measures. The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the primary teachers' union, announced the same day that teachers and principals had voted "resoundingly" to reject the latest pay offer from the Labour Party-led government.

Transport workers face a political struggle against years of privatisation and cost-cutting imposed by successive Labour and National Party governments with the assistance of the trade unions. Regional councils manage the delivery of public transport by contracting private operators who profit out of providing services. Labour Party-run councils in Wellington and Auckland have played a key role in this process.

The GWRC launched its revamped bus operation on

July 15 with a new fleet, changed timetables and restructured fares. The private operators' profits have been ratcheted up through reduced services and attacks on workers' wages, jobs and conditions.

Tranzit declared it would abolish 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, plus penalty rates. Tranzit has employed new drivers on a flat rate of \$22 an hour, with no penalty rates.

NZ Bus made 240 drivers redundant as a result of the change of bus operators. Many experienced drivers refused to sign up to Tranzit, which has imposed harsh working conditions, including 13–14 hour shifts and split-shifts. According to media reports, Tranzit subsidiary Tranzurban has called the police against union officials attempting to speak with drivers.

However, far from opposing these attacks, the Tramways Union has suppressed strike action while seeking to bring Tranzit to the negotiating table to reach a deal for a new contract. In July, the union called a limited work-to-rule by drivers in the Hutt Valley over the work rosters, while keeping the bus system operating. Drivers in nearby Wellington were kept at work.

At a public event attended by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in April, union official Graham Clark declared that drivers would set up pickets in June and July to prevent Tranzit buses from leaving the depots. Wellington commuters would have to "get used to walking," Clark warned. In the event, none of this actually took place.

Underlining the union's corporatist position, on September 19 it took out a full-page advertisement in the *Dominion Post*, appealing to the GWRC to "listen

to the drivers” and pressure the companies to “negotiate a fair deal.” It emphasised that union members had front-line experience and knowledge that could “help fix” the fiasco caused by the new bus schedule “if their union is involved.”

Following last week’s strike vote, Tramways Union secretary Kevin O’Sullivan told Fairfax Media the union had been pleading “to get Transit to negotiate for months and still have no offer from them or any indication they are taking the bargaining seriously. This is why we have now had to set a deadline.”

O’Sullivan said if no “fair deal” were reached, the “driver shortage will continue, the industrial action will continue, and drivers will continue to have no reason to even try to make this broken system work.” The union’s “deadline” gives it enough time to manoeuvre, backtrack and call off the strike if the company goes back into talks.

Significant strike action by drivers would receive overwhelming support from the public. Thousands of commuters have had their bus travel disrupted and inconvenienced by the discontinuation of regular bus routes, late and overcrowded buses, cancelled services, buses going in the wrong direction, and new “bus hubs” that force passengers to transfer at multiple points just to get from Wellington’s suburbs into the city centre.

A parliamentary select committee has given the council until December 1 to fix the bus system. GWRC chairman and former Labour politician Chris Laidlaw, however, told the committee on September 27 that he could not “think of anything in particular” he would do differently.

GWRC chief executive Greg Campbell blamed the dispute on a lack of drivers, unfit buses and the previous National Party government’s privatised Public Transport Operating Model (PTOM), which the council implemented first on its passenger rail service. Campbell said an “independent review” would be commissioned to explain the disastrous bus operation.

Council of Trade Unions president Richard Wagstaff wrote in Fairfax Media on August 11 that Labour’s proposed legislation for Fair Pay Agreements (FPAs) “give us hope for minimum standards” that will “protect decent incomes and safe hours, without drivers being forced into industrial action.” The FPAs will totally ban strikes during industry-wide pay

negotiations, while reinforcing the role of unions as industrial policemen.

The unions are working to protect the Labour government and enforce its demands for austerity by isolating workers as they come into struggle. Bus drivers have been separated from striking nurses and teachers, and from other transport workers in Wellington, Auckland and elsewhere, who are facing the same attacks.

The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU), which covers Wellington’s rail workers, released a joint statement with employers Transdev and Hyundai Rotem on September 19, saying they “have agreed provisional terms for settlement” for a new contract, subject to ratification by workers via a postal ballot.

The RMTU will hold a stopwork meeting on October 10 to try to ram through the agreement. It will be no improvement on the previous agreement, which held pay increases to the rate of inflation and resulted in the loss of 11 full-time passenger operator jobs, split-shifts for part-timers, and more long hours and shift-work for train managers, locomotive engineers and other staff.

Bus workers need to draw lessons from the recent experiences of other sections of NZ workers, especially nurses, who, despite courageous struggles have, once again, been betrayed by the unions and the Labour government. Only by making a complete political break from the unions and their sell-out deals, and forming independent rank-and-file committees to organise a unified industrial and political struggle for decent jobs, wages and working conditions, can bus workers mount a genuine industrial and political struggle to take forward their demands. For this, a new, socialist perspective, is needed.

We urge all bus workers who want to develop such a struggle to contact the NZ Socialist Equality Group here to discuss these vital issues.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact