New Zealand: Bus union ends Wellington strike

Tom Peters
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The Tramways Union, which covers bus drivers in the Wellington region, called off a strike on October 30, ending four days of industrial action that caused minimal disruption to commuter services in the New Zealand capital.

In September, more than 230 bus drivers in Wellington and nearby Porirua and the Hutt Valley voted to strike over low wages and attacks on working conditions by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) and its new private bus operator Tranzurban, owned by Tranzit. The strike was set to run until November 30.

Union leaders, however, called off the action without a resolution, calling the move "an act of good faith," and resumed talks with Tranzurban, facilitated by the Employment Relations Authority.

The Wellington action followed a 24-hour strike in Auckland on October 23, involving 100 bus drivers employed by Pavlovich and Ritchies Murphy Transport. Another 100 drivers at Go Bus held a four-hour strike in the city of Hamilton, their fifth industrial action this year.

The strikes are part of a growing movement, involving thousands of workers who are seeking to fight back against a wage freeze and attacks on conditions since the global financial crisis of 2008.

About 30,000 primary teachers and 30,000 nurses and hospital workers have held nationwide strikes this year to demand better wages and staffing levels. There have been significant strikes also by rail workers, public servants, fast food workers, and at Bluescope Steel and Auckland University of Technology.

The strikes are part of an international upsurge of the working class, including strikes by teachers and delivery workers in the United States, Latin America, India and Europe.

Bus drivers are paid only a few dollars above the minimum wage of $16.50 an hour. Tranzurban took over 60 percent of the GWRC's bus routes in July, promising to reduce costs by introducing larger buses, reducing services and cutting wages. The sweeping changes to Wellington timetables caused chaos, with many commuters angry about unreliable and less frequent services.

Tranzurban pays drivers $22 an hour, up from between $18.65 and $19.35 under their previous employer NZ Bus. However, Tranzurban eliminated penalty rates of time-and-a-half on Saturday, double time on Sunday, and extra pay for overtime, resulting in a pay cut for many drivers, in some cases by hundreds of dollars.

The cost of living, meanwhile, has soared. The price of a modest house is now around $600,000 in Wellington and up to $1 million in Auckland, far beyond the reach of most working class families. Nationwide, rents increased 25 percent between 2012 and 2017, while wages only rose 14 percent.

Drivers in Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington are also angry about unsocial, gruelling and potentially dangerous working conditions. In many cases, drivers work split shifts, with long unpaid breaks in the middle of the day, leading to high levels of fatigue.

At every turn, the trade unions have sought to divide workers, delay and limit industrial action as much as possible, and drag out disputes in order to demoralise workers and impose sellout agreements. They have also sought to subordinate workers to the Labour Party, which now has been in office nationally for more than a year.

In June 2017, the Tramways Union promoted a Facebook video message by then-Labour Party leader Andrew Little saying the GWRC was "trying to drive

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down the wages and conditions of these workers… It's not right." Labour MPs were invited repeatedly to speak to union meetings, where union leaders welcomed them.

The Labour Party-led government, formed following the September 2017 election, shamelessly continues to pose as a supporter of bus workers. In parliament on October 23, Transport Minister Phil Twyford declared the coalition parties "believe in raising incomes." He ruled out any intervention in the present disputes, however, saying the government was still "looking at fixing the problems that we inherited from [the previous National Party government's] competitive tendering framework."

This is a fraud. For the past year the government has done nothing to stop cost cutting at the expense of workers. It has refused to prevent councils from outsourcing transport and other services to the lowest bidder.

Moreover, the GWRC and Auckland Council are both controlled by former Labour Party MPs, who have behaved just as ruthlessly as their National Party counterparts. Auckland mayor and former Labour Party leader Phil Goff has also overseen major cuts to the arts and library services.

In the months leading up to Tranzurban's takeover, the Tramways Union refused to strike, instead encouraging illusions in the government and negotiating behind the scenes with the GWRC and the company.

This allowed Tranzurban to take over the council contracts in July without any serious obstacles. Almost 300 NZ Bus workers were made redundant. Roughly half were re-hired by the new company. Others reportedly retired, moved to other areas of the country, or were simply left without a job.

Like other unions, the Tramways Union has suppressed strike action for decades. Union secretary Kevin O'Sullivan told Fairfax Media on September 26: "1996 was the last time we did anything, and even that wasn't on this scale."

In fact, October's strike action caused only minor disruption in Wellington. Most bus drivers continued working, although some apparently refused to accept fares. The council's transport agency said 96.7 percent of commuter services operated on schedule. Fairfax Media said the union "warned up to 130 Tranzurban drivers could take part in the strike, but as of 4.30 p.m. on [October 26], only 25 of the company's 290 drivers had not turned up for work."

No attempt was made to involve non-union members, or to broaden the struggle by including rail workers in the capital, who face similar attacks. The Rail and Maritime Transport Union is currently seeking to push through yet another sellout agreement for the commuter rail network, which is run by private company Transdev on a GWRC contract.

FIRST Union and the Tramways Union are now urging the Labour government to facilitate an industry-wide employment agreement for bus drivers using proposed "fair pay agreements" legislation, which would outlaw strikes during the negotiations.

Transport workers can fight against the sellouts being prepared behind their backs only by rebelling against the pro-capitalist unions. Bus and rail workers need to organise independently by forming rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves. These organisations should forge links with workers in different parts of the country and different industries, and workers in Australia, the US and internationally.

The broadest possible campaign must be launched against the Labour Party-led government, which is continuing the policies of austerity demanded by big business. This agenda can be defeated only by uniting the working class on the basis of a socialist political strategy to reorganise society on the basis of human need, not corporate profit.

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