

New Zealand bus worker dies of stroke after corporate restructure

Our correspondent
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Wellington bus worker Dmitri Edwards, 49, died on February 26, when life support was turned off at Wellington hospital. He had suffered a stroke five days earlier following an extremely stressful work-week.

Dmitri worked as a controller for NZ Bus, organising rosters for drivers. His brother, Nik Edwards, believes his stroke was a result of the intensified exploitation of NZ Bus workers following a corporate restructure of public transport services in Wellington last year.

Nik told the *Dominion Post* that Dmitri, who joined NZ Bus in 2012 and was a skilled and capable worker, was placed under enormous pressure to minimise service cancellations due to staff shortages. He died following a “day from hell,” during which he had to make 85 changes to rosters and schedules.

NZ Bus is owned by Infratil, a major infrastructure, transport and energy investment company, and has operated bus services on behalf of the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) since 2005.

On July 15, 2018 the GWRC launched major cost-cutting of the bus services: 60 percent of the capital’s routes were handed to Tranzit Group, which promised to slash millions in operating costs. NZ Bus’s share of services was reduced from 73 percent to 28 percent.

NZ Bus made 240 drivers redundant in Wellington and nearby Hutt Valley. Many older workers retired; some moved to different areas of New Zealand or simply remained unemployed. Most refused to re-apply for jobs with Tranzit at reduced pay. Tranzit pays drivers \$22 an hour—compared with \$18.65 and \$19.35 under NZ Bus—but eliminated penalty rates of time-and-a-half on Saturday, double time on Sunday, and overtime rates.

NZ Bus, meanwhile, failed to keep enough workers to cope with its much-reduced share of routes. Fairfax Media reported that the council had fined NZ Bus an

astonishing 17,663 times in five months since October 2018 for breaches of contract due to cancellations, late services and the use of wrong-sized buses.

Dmitri Edwards worked in the radio industry during the 1990s. His former colleague, Newstalk ZB presenter Andrew Dickens, said Dmitri told him he faced “a nightmare” at work. He denounced the council’s restructure and said the chronic driver shortage was “spurred on” by NZ Bus’s low wages.

Nik Edwards told the *World Socialist Web Site* his brother Dmitri was highly experienced and a hard worker who “knew all the runs off by heart.” He regularly worked “graveyard” shifts of 9 p.m. to 5.30 a.m.

Nik said NZ Bus “had lots of changes and there have been a lot of issues: not having enough drivers, and buses breaking down,” and was “losing a number of shifts a day, cancelling rides here and there.”

Dmitri was placed “under immense pressure. He had the ability to absorb a lot of pressure but I think it was just too much for him in the end. He was trying to do an impossible job.” Nik said his brother was well-liked by his co-workers but “bullied” by some managers who treated him as “the golden boy who would fix shifts, which would save the company time and money.”

Nik blamed these conditions on “the free market. That’s the problem. If the council was running it then the money would be coming back to the council, instead of to private enterprises and going offshore. It’s ridiculous.” Buses should be run as “a public service for the community,” he said.

Nik noted that over the last three decades, under Labour and National Party governments, transport services had been privatised. “Profits have gone up, the hours of work have gone up, but salaries have remained the same,” he said.

Following Dmitri's death, NZ Bus had sent "no card, no boss of his has turned up with condolences, the chief executive has no comment to make," Nik said. "Everyone wants to wash their hands, no responsibility, no care. They treat the workers like a unit: like, oh well, he's gone, we'll just replace him with someone else."

Nik understood that the government department WorkSafe was investigating his brother's death, but he had so far heard nothing from the agency, despite repeated requests for information.

Nik said bus workers he had spoken to wanted to strike because they were "not happy with what's going on. Some of them are barely getting enough shifts and some are not able to get enough work." Others were stressed from overwork and felt bullied following the restructure. "They're ready to throw in the towel and some of them have thrown in the towel. It's a mess."

Responsibility for the public transport chaos rests not only with the Labour- and Green Party-controlled GWRC—which also privatised the region's passenger rail in 2016. The Labour-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has refused to intervene to resolve the crisis and lift workers' wages. With the support of the trade union bureaucracy, Labour has deepened the austerity agenda of the 2008–2017 National Party government, starving public services such as health, education and public transport of funds.

Labour campaigned in the 2017 election posturing as a friend of transport workers, but has not stopped the ruthless competition between private transport operators to drive down pay and conditions. Last month Transport Minister Phil Twyford definitively ruled out any government intervention in the Wellington bus system.

The Tramways Union promoted Labour's false election promises. It refused to call any industrial action until after the GWRC's restructure, telling workers to put their faith in a Labour government. In October 2018, the union held a limited four-day strike by Wellington bus workers employed with Tranzit, which was called off without any settlement of the pay dispute.

The union has outrageously portrayed NZ Bus as a model employer, with whom union officials have "a pretty good relationship," despite the company's low wages and appalling conditions. A February 19 Tramways Union press release said it was "particularly

galling to see [the council] attacking NZ Bus" over Wellington's driver shortage "while giving a free pass once again to Tranzit," which "refused to engage" with the union.

Two days after this statement, Dmitri Edwards suffered his fatal stroke while working under the extremely stressful conditions imposed on him by the GWRC, the Labour government and NZ Bus, assisted by the union bureaucracy. The Tramways Union has released no public statement on Dmitri's death.



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