

Australia: All Sydney bus services to be privatised within two years

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The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal government last month announced that remaining state-run bus services will be privatised within the next two years. The decision follows the privatisation of bus services in Sydney's Inner West last year and Newcastle in 2017, and ferry services in Sydney in 2012.

Buses in the north-western suburbs, the Lower North Shore, the Northern Beaches, and the Eastern Suburbs, are the only remaining public transport services directly operated by State Transit, a government agency which currently employs around 3,500 workers.

While State Transit chief executive Steffen Faurby claimed that “the majority” of award staff—2,900 drivers and 200 maintenance workers—would be guaranteed a job at private bus operators under the same terms, this promise only applies for the next three years, paving the way for mass sackings after October 2022.

There is no indication as to whether some 300 white-collar staff at the imminently defunct agency will be offered jobs by the private operators.

Drivers have also raised concerns that they will not continue to receive pay loadings for driving certain types of vehicle, which currently make up \$100 or more of their weekly pay.

While promises to improve Sydney's ailing public transport system were a major part of Premier Gladys Berejiklian's campaign platform in the state election in March this year, no mention was made of the upcoming bus service sell-off.

NSW Transport Minister Andrew Constance was quick to offer assurances that the Liberal government has no plans to privatise the train network, but these claims were met with scepticism from railway workers and ordinary people.

In fact, the privatisation of Sydney's railways has already begun. The new Sydney Metro rail system is a “public-private partnership,” in which taxpayers bear the costs and private companies reap the profits. The Metro system is particularly attractive to private operators because it uses fully automated, driverless trains, eliminating hundreds of

jobs.

On January 9, 2018, the entire Sydney Trains network ground to a halt, following the release of a new timetable. Almost all scheduled services were cancelled or delayed, leaving thousands of passengers stranded.

The shutdown was the end product of decades of union-supported attacks on working conditions—70-hour-weeks, enforced overtime, minimal breaks between shifts, perpetual driver shortages—and cuts to maintenance. While the new timetable included almost 1,500 additional services each week there was no expansion of staff numbers or additions to the ageing fleet.

Later that month, the Fair Work Commission—a pro-business industrial tribunal created by the Rudd Labor Government—banned railway workers from carrying out a planned strike. Despite opposition from workers, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) enforced the anti-democratic ruling. The union then rammed through a new enterprise agreement mandating a below-cost-of-living annual three percent pay rise, forced redundancies, increased casualisation and numerous other concessions.

The RTBU and the Labor opposition have labeled the latest sell-off of bus services a “betrayal.” The reality, however, is that it is only the latest in a decades-long program of privatisation, carried out around Australia by Labor and Liberal-National governments and facilitated by the RTBU and other unions.

The RTBU has been aware of the plan to sell off the remaining bus services since at least July, when it published a news item on its website calling on readers to sign an online petition. While the union vowed to “fight hard” to protect bus drivers' wages and conditions, this fight has so far consisted of polite appeals of the Berejiklian government.

In 2017, Chris Preston, then secretary of the RTBU's NSW bus division, applauded Berejiklian's role in the privatisation of Sydney's ferries, saying, “She knew how to talk to the union.”

In 2016, Preston had “cautiously welcomed” the announcement that buses in Newcastle would be privatised,

proclaiming it a “great step forward for Newcastle transport workers.”

Within weeks of Keolis Downer taking over bus services in Newcastle, around 70 drivers reported that they had been substantially underpaid by the company.

Passengers have also suffered as a result of the privatisation of public transport services.

A report by the NSW auditor-general revealed that on-time performance of Newcastle buses fell from 94 percent in 2016–17 (while still publicly operated) to 91 percent in 2017–18, the first year in private hands. In fact, the real figure is even lower, because the statistics for 2017–18 do not include cancelled services, which were previously counted as late.

The privatisation of bus services in Sydney’s Inner West was justified with claims of poor performance by the state-owned operator. The private operator, however, has failed to meet the target of 95 percent of buses running on time every month since taking over in July last year. Between January and April of this year, 90.5 percent of Inner West buses ran on time, compared to 93.5 percent over the corresponding period in 2018, when the buses were operated by State Transit.

The main factor causing delays to bus services is traffic, which privatising bus companies does nothing to solve. As Sydney’s population has increased, nothing has been done to address fundamental infrastructure problems contributing to the congestion on the city’s roads and public transport.

The long commutes faced by many workers are a direct result of the growing social inequality fostered by capitalism.

Stagnant or declining wages and inflated housing prices fuelled by rampant speculation force workers further from urban centres where workplaces, schools, hospitals, and other necessary social services are concentrated. At the same time, the corporations and the unions have overseen the destruction of swathes of manufacturing and industry in working-class areas, including the western suburbs of Sydney.

A 2017 State Transit report revealed that efforts to adjust bus timetables to reflect increased traffic congestion were stymied for years by the NSW government, leading to unrealistic and unachievable schedules. The revelation led some to suggest that the government had deliberately allowed the inaccurate timetable to remain in place to frustrate passengers, paving the way for broader public acceptance of privatisation.

After Sydney’s ferries were privatised in mid-2012, cancellations (not related to weather) rose by 50 percent, and fares increased by 25 percent. On the popular Manly route there were 73 percent more cancellations and fares increased

by 39 percent. In addition, there were five ferry collisions in 2012–13, compared with zero the previous year.

Labor transport spokesman Chris Minns claimed that the latest round of bus service sell-offs is based on the Liberal government’s “ideological obsession” rather than performance data. In reality, it is the product of a pro-business program, aimed at subordinating social needs to the profit interests of big business, which is fully embraced by Labor.

Privatisation of Sydney buses began after the 2004 Unsworth review, ordered by former Labor Premier Bob Carr, whose government also presided over the sell-off of NSW’s rail freight services and the destruction of train maintenance workshops and track repair divisions.

Subsequent Labor governments continued the privatisation of public infrastructure, including the state’s electricity network.

The privatisation of hospitals, utilities, and transport under the current Liberal government is merely a continuation of this process, carried out by both major parties, and endorsed by the unions.

The crisis of transport infrastructure in Sydney and elsewhere demands a complex solution that takes into account the organisation and planning of the city as a whole, rather than attempting to address transport as a separate issue.

Only under a socialist system, in which roads and public transport are developed as components of the entire system of economic and social activity, will major cities such as Sydney be able to resolve their infrastructure crises.

This kind of rational planning cannot be developed on a for-profit basis. Major public works, including all forms of transport infrastructure, must be publicly owned, and should be developed according to the needs of the majority, not the profit interests of the capitalist oligarchs.



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