

# Australia: Sydney bus drivers threaten strike over COVID-19 dangers

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Bus drivers covering several major population centres in Sydney have threatened to carry out a 48-hour strike beginning next Monday if their demands for basic safety measures to mitigate the dangers posed by COVID-19 are not met.

The dispute is the latest indication of broader opposition within the working class to the criminally-negligent and profit-driven official response to the pandemic.

Over the past month teachers, warehouse employees and meat workers, especially in Melbourne, the current coronavirus epicentre, have begun to register their hostility to the pro-business “reopening of the economy” and the enforcement of unsafe conditions by governments and the employers. Several stoppages have been carried out, along with an expanding discussion on social media about the dangers.

The Sydney drivers are calling for mask wearing to be made mandatory on services that exceed nominal limits on passenger numbers. They are also opposing the scrapping of physical distancing requirements.

The threat to strike follows the publication of images on social media and in the press showing crowded Sydney bus services with dozens of passengers standing in close proximity to one another without masks or any other precautions. Despite government regulations supposedly mandating that buses carry fewer passengers than before the pandemic, nothing has been done to boost the number of services.

A Sydney driver who spoke to the WSWs yesterday commented: “I think there is not enough safety protection. I believe that very strongly. There’s no mystery about it. We all know that with front line workers like nurses and doctors—not that we are the same as nurses and doctors—there are kids and other people running around who could have the virus.

“It’s a very hard thing because you don’t know who’s getting on your bus. Not everybody is wearing a mask. Some people who are coughing on the bus don’t put their hands over their mouth.”

The driver said: “At the beginning of the pandemic I had to supply my own masks. I had to supply all my own personal protection. Now when you sign in they give you about two, maybe four, masks.”

The stoppage, if it proceeds, will involve drivers in regions 7, 8 and 9 of the Sydney bus network, encompassing the city’s eastern, northwestern, north shore and northern beaches suburbs.

The threat by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) of industrial action indicates a groundswell of anger among rank and file drivers. Throughout the pandemic the union has done nothing to oppose the dangerous conditions on public transport or violations by the authorities of their own regulations.

This has been in line with the RTBU’s decades long role as an industrial police force that has slashed jobs, wages and conditions for bus, train and ferry staff, and has facilitated the privatisation of much of the city’s public transportation system.

The union has previously prevented any action by drivers, even as reports have emerged for months of overcrowding on the buses.

In early May, the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced that the number of passengers on Sydney buses would be restricted to 12. This was aimed at justifying as safe the full resumption of services in line with a broader push to force workers back into workplaces.

Green stickers were plastered on seats, indicating where passengers were permitted to sit. It emerged almost immediately, however, that State Transit, the government body running public transport, had sent a directive to drivers instructing them that they were required to pick up all passengers, regardless of overcrowding. The directive insisted that school children, who often board in large cohorts, were not to be left at their stops “under any circumstances.”

A government report, released under a freedom of information request in July, revealed that throughout June,

when those restrictions were in force, 10 percent of bus services in the morning peak hour exceeded capacity requirements, and 13 percent during the evening peak. The figures were 23 percent and 28 percent across the train network.

The report did not propose any measures to remedy the situation. Instead it called for the restrictions to be scrapped. Accordingly, in early July the Berejiklian government announced that the recommended 1.5-metre distance between individuals, aimed at preventing transmission, would no longer apply on buses. The green stickers have remained, but they are merely window dressing. Passengers have been “encouraged” to wear masks, but nothing has been mandated.

The nominal restrictions have not been reintroduced, despite the re-emergence of community transmission of the virus in Sydney. Over the past six weeks, clusters have emerged across the city, with daily new infections often in the low double-digits.

The dangers confronting Sydney bus drivers are underscored by the conditions facing their colleagues internationally. At least 33 London bus drivers have lost their lives after being infected by COVID-19 as a result of unsafe conditions enforced by the government and the unions. Hostility to the conditions has contributed to a massive vote in favour of strike action. Dozens of transport workers also have perished in New York and other major cities across the US.

The RTBU’s announcement of the threatened stoppage came in a pathetic letter appealing to the Berejiklian government to “put the needs and safety of the travelling public first.” The tepid character of the letter was made plain by its request that the government “provide clarity around the enforcement of physical distancing on transport.”

The union letter was aimed at creating the conditions for the strike to be called off in the event that the government releases a mealy-mouthed statement expressing its commitment to safety on public transport.

The union, moreover, has refused to mobilise all bus drivers in the stoppage in a bid to isolate strikers and pit staff in different regions against one another. No action is planned among rail or ferry staff who confront the same dangers as their colleagues on the buses.

Revealingly, the union’s primary complaint is that the government rebuffed its repeated appeals for closed-door meetings over the past months. The RTBU is anxious, above all, to ensure its own seat at the negotiating table where it bargains away the jobs, rights and conditions of its members in exchange for the privileges of the union officialdom.

Over the past decade alone, the RTBU has enforced the privatisation of Sydney ferry services in 2012, the sell-off of

bus services in the regional city of Newcastle in 2017, and the transfer of inner-west Sydney bus routes to private operators in 2018.

In March 2018, the union suppressed widespread opposition among NSW rail workers to stepped-up government attacks on wages and conditions. The RTBU acceded to the banning of a 24-hour strike by the workers, and then imposed a sell-out agreement that mandated an ongoing pro-business restructuring of the network including the closure of operational facilities, forced redundancies and the expansion of casual and contract labour.

The union, while making token protests, has since signalled that it will back the privatisation of what remains of state-operated bus services throughout Sydney. This will include sweeping job cuts and the further casualisation of the workforce.

The RTBU letter, threatening the stoppage, called only for the delay of “privatisation plans until this crisis is over.” This was an appeal to the government not to inflame anger among drivers, and a pledge that the union would force through the sell-offs in the future.

The record demonstrates that bus drivers and transport workers can defend their rights, including to a safe working environment, only through a rebellion against the RTBU.

New organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file safety committees, are required to enforce basic health measures and coordinate an industrial and political struggle against the offensive on transport workers’ jobs, wages and conditions, linked to the fight of public transport workers globally.

The privatisations and restructurings of the past decade demonstrate the need for a new perspective that rejects the subordination of public transport and other social needs to the profit interests of the corporate elite. That means the fight for workers’ governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing all transport, along with the major banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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