

Australian union cancels Sydney bus drivers' strike

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The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced on Thursday evening it had called off a threatened strike by Sydney bus drivers next week. The stoppage, in Australia's most populous city, would have been the largest action by any section of workers in the country since the COVID-19 crisis began.

The cancellation of the strike is in line with the role played by the unions throughout the coronavirus crisis. They have sought to suppress every industrial and political struggle against the profit-driven official response to the pandemic. The unions also have imposed sweeping cuts to jobs, wages and conditions, facilitating the attempts of the ruling elite to force working people to pay for the economic breakdown triggered by the pandemic.

The RTBU had announced on Tuesday that drivers covering three regions of the state-operated bus network in northern and eastern Sydney were considering a 48-hour stoppage that would have begun next Monday morning.

In a letter to the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government, RTBU executives said the threatened strike was motivated by concerns over drivers' safety amid the pandemic, as well as opposition to the privatisation of the few sections of the Sydney bus network that remain publicly-operated.

The strike threat came after pictures emerged on social media and in the press of dozens of passengers crammed into peak hour bus services, despite ongoing community transmission of the coronavirus. In May, the NSW government imposed restrictions on passenger numbers, to justify the full resumption of services as part of a pro-business back-to-work campaign.

Within weeks, it was revealed that the restrictions were a sham. Bus drivers had been instructed to pick up all passengers, and few additional services had been added. The consequence was ongoing overcrowding, especially

during peak services. In July, the government abandoned even the pretence of mandated social-distancing on buses.

In its letter threatening the strike, the RTBU had called only for masks to be made compulsory for passengers on overcrowded services. It requested that the government "provide clarity around the enforcement of physical distancing on transport."

As the WSWS warned last Wednesday, the tepid character of the demands was aimed at creating the conditions for the cancellation of the stoppage, if the government issued a reply promising to consider the union requests.

That is what took place. On Thursday, the union had a closed-door meeting with government representatives at the pro-business Industrial Relations Commission, the first such conference in several months. One of the RTBU's chief complaints had been that the government had refused to meet with it throughout most of the pandemic.

The NSW government promised the union it would conduct a "review" of safety measures on buses. The RTBU immediately hailed this worthless gesture, which commits the government to nothing, as a major "concession."

NSW Transport Minister Andrew Constance, who has spearheaded a push to privatise public transport and has overseen the destruction of hundreds of jobs across the state's bus and rail networks, publicly thanked the union leadership for calling off the stoppage and described the meeting as "constructive." A further gathering of government officials and union bureaucrats is slated to occur on Monday.

Comments to the WSWS by a Sydney bus driver on Wednesday underscored the fraudulent character of the union's claims to be waging a struggle against the state government.

The driver pointed to safety concerns, noting: "I have

operated my bus at full standing load. Because I cannot physically stop anyone, it's not safe for me either. I make sure that no one is standing close to me. That's all I can do. You cannot stop the virus like that, if people are standing close together. It could spread here quickly here as well, like it has in Melbourne."

The driver said there had been no discussion within the RTBU about a campaign for increased safety measures. He said RTBU officials had not even mentioned the issue of safety at an August 14 union meeting to discuss the strike.

Instead, the RTBU told workers that the strike would be directed against the further privatisation of bus services. In its public statements, however, the union called only for "community consultation" on the privatisation and a delay in its implementation "until after the crisis was over."

This brands the RTBU's threat to call a strike as a cynical manoeuvre, designed to dampen down mounting anger among bus drivers over its enforcement of the privatisation. The union only raised the issue of safety to provide the grounds for cancelling the stoppage if the government promised to "review" health measures.

The RTBU was well aware that the government would make no concession, however worthless, on the issue of privatisation, which was not even mentioned in the announcement that the strike had been called off.

As the Sydney driver noted, the union has already overseen the privatisation of most of the bus network and the plans to sell off what remains are far advanced. "The government already announced the privatisation," the driver said. "Once things are out on the market, the government is not going to roll back their decision." He added that the union "did not negotiate very well with the government" and had been "unable to understand the drivers' problems clearly."

In 2017, when the NSW government announced it would privatise bus services in Sydney's inner-west and south, the union called for "consultation" and held only one token 24-hour strike. It proceeded to enforce the handover of the bus services to Transit Systems, a private company, without any further action.

Last year, the NSW government revealed that it would sell off all remaining Sydney bus services, those in the city's north and east. The RTBU responded to the announcement, which threatens the jobs of 3,500 State Transit employees, 2,900 drivers and 200 maintenance workers, with appeals to the government and feckless "community petitions."

The RTBU's role in the assault on bus drivers extends over decades. It supported the previous NSW Labor government in 2004, as it commissioned the Unsworth review, calling for bus services to be based on a "demand driven approach" that would "mesh private and public bus services for the first time." Buses throughout the west and southwest of Sydney are operated by private companies, which receive multi-billion dollar government contracts.

More recently, the RTBU backed the sell-off of Sydney ferry services in 2012. In 2016, the union "cautiously welcomed" the privatisation of all ferry and bus services, along with a new light rail line, in Newcastle, a major regional hub north of Sydney.

The record demonstrates that the union is an industrial police force, directly implementing the demands of governments and the massive corporations that dominate the transport sector.

Bus drivers and other transport workers can defend their most basic interests, including to a safe working environment and a job, only through a rebellion against the union. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required to organise a unified political and industrial campaign of all transport workers against the corporate offensive.

Above all, the subordination of transport by governments and the unions to the profit interests of the corporations shows the need for a new political perspective, which rejects the domination of the financial elite over every aspect of society. That means fighting for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing transport, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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