

New Zealand: Lockout of Wellington bus drivers lifted after court ruling

Our reporters
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Last Thursday, New Zealand's biggest public transport company, NZ Bus, announced an indefinite lockout of about 280 drivers in Wellington who were to hold a 24-hour strike the following day against attacks on wages and conditions.

The Tramways Union filed an injunction with the Employment Court, which on Saturday ordered that the lockout be lifted. The court ruled that there was "an arguable case" that NZ Bus's lockout notice was unlawful.

Bus services have resumed but the pay dispute remains unresolved. The company said it would not rule out more lockouts if there was not "significant progress" on pay talks this week. The talks will be mediated by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), chaired by the Labour Party's Daran Ponter, which contracts NZ Bus for services in the capital.

Public transport workers throughout New Zealand have faced continuous attacks on their wages and conditions by private corporations and local councils seeking to slash costs and maximise profits.

Internationally, the onslaught against the working class has accelerated over the past year, with companies seizing on the coronavirus pandemic to restructure at the expense of workers. In New Zealand, big business has collaborated with the unions and the Labour-led government to slash thousands of jobs and freeze wages. In the 12 months to June 2020, the median weekly income dropped by \$43, or 6 percent, while the cost of living, especially housing, soared.

NZ Bus, owned by Australian private equity firm Next Capital, is seeking to reduce Wellington drivers' annual leave from five weeks to four, slash overtime rates from time-and-a-half to time-and-a-quarter, and end penalty rates for weekend work. Currently drivers make time-and-a-half on Saturdays and double time on

Sundays. The company is promising a small pay increase that would not make up for the loss of overtime pay.

On April 14, after pay negotiations had broken down, drivers voted overwhelmingly to take strike action. In response to the strike notice, NZ Bus chief executive Jay Zmijewsk declared on Thursday that drivers would be locked out until the offer is accepted.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with locked out drivers picketing outside the Kilbirnie depot in Wellington on Friday. There was considerable public support, with vehicles tooting as they went past.

Malcolm, who has been driving buses for seven-and-a-half years, explained: "Most of us are being underpaid. Personally I'm on \$19.89, which is 11 cents below the legal minimum wage."

The minimum wage went up to \$20 an hour on April 1, but workers said NZ Bus has delayed passing on the increase. One driver, Deborah, asked: "How does this happen and why doesn't someone step in? It is disgusting, I'm so angry about it."

Malcolm said the government "hasn't done very much" since promising in the 2017 election to improve transport workers' wages. "I think it's pretty disgusting, coming from a Labour government," he said, pointing out that Labour had retained the Public Transport Operating Model (PTOM) introduced by the previous National Party government. This allows private companies to compete for council contracts by promising the lowest labour costs.

Drivers also highlighted the gruelling split shifts that can cause dangerous levels of fatigue. They often have 12-hour working days, but are paid for eight hours.

Malini, a driver with 10 years' experience, said the job had a "massive level of responsibility for minimum pay. It's not right." He described the lockout as "a

prime example of people above controlling the power. They're the ones that get the profit, that's all they're interested in: how much they can get out of their portfolio. They don't worry about the people they're affecting."

Michael, an older worker, said he felt sorry for his co-workers who had families to support. "You've got to stand up and be counted," he said. "Taking away a week's holiday: what's that all about? People have fought for years for these rights."

A worker from a different bus company who joined the picket said NZ Bus was "trying to starve people" into accepting the attack on their conditions. A prolonged lockout would cause severe hardship, with some drivers unable to pay their rent.

Seeking to divert workers' anger in a nationalist direction, Council of Trade Unions (CTU) leader Richard Wagstaff stated on April 23: "NZ Bus, and their owners Australian company Next Capital, have shown themselves to be quite out of touch with the way we conduct business in New Zealand."

The portrayal of local capitalists as more benign is a fraud. NZ Bus's actions are the latest in a string of attacks imposed by councils and transport companies with the collaboration of the union bureaucracy.

In July 2018 the GWRC tendered out over 60 percent of the region's routes to Tranzit Group, which resulted in NZ Bus's share of routes being reduced from 73 percent to 28 percent. Hundreds of drivers retired as a result of the restructure, leading to a major driver shortage.

The New Zealand-owned Tranzit, which operates as Tranzurban, proceeded to eliminate weekend and overtime rates, setting a benchmark for the attacks by NZ Bus. In a statement on February 20, 2019, Tramways Union defended NZ Bus, depicting it as an "employer who has dealt with its drivers in good faith," while Tranzit "refused to engage" with the union.

NZ Bus has recently told the media it wants the same pay and conditions in Wellington that were accepted by Tramways in Auckland last year in a deal covering 800 drivers. The union's Gary Froggatt told *Stuff* on September 16, 2020 that the agreement contained "overtime rates of 1.25 times the ordinary rate, and 1.5 times when a sixth day is worked," i.e. significantly lower than the Wellington rates.

More than 18,600 people have signed an online

petition posted by the CTU, denouncing NZ Bus's attempt to slash wages and conditions as "unacceptable." The unions have made no effort to unite workers throughout the country in an industrial campaign against government austerity and corporate attacks. They instead encourage support for the Labour Party, which is responsible for the privatisation of services and the resulting poverty-level wages.

The WSWS warns that drivers cannot place any confidence in the Ardern government, the councils or the unions. In opposition to the nationalism promoted by the unions, bus workers should broaden their fight by linking up with other workers in New Zealand, Australia and internationally who are facing similar attacks.

For this fight to proceed new organisations are needed: rank-and-file committees controlled by the workers themselves and independent of the unions and the Labour Party. Workers need to unify on the basis of the fight for a workers' government and socialist demands, including the nationalisation of essential industries, such as transport, under workers' control—with a major boost to wages and conditions funded by expropriating the funds of billionaires who are profiting from the impoverishment of the working class.



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