

New Zealand: Wellington bus drivers reject second pay offer, vote for strikes

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24 May 2021

At a stopwork meeting last Thursday, bus drivers in New Zealand's capital city Wellington voted 204–3 to reject a new pay offer from NZ Bus and approved a fresh round of strikes. Drivers also passed a unanimous motion of no confidence in NZ Bus management, declaring the company was not fit to run public transport services.

The meeting followed a week of talks mediated by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), chaired by the Labour Party's Daran Ponter, which contracts NZ Bus, the country's largest operator, for services in the capital.

NZ Bus had offered drivers with more than five years' service a "bonus" of \$10,000 if they accepted major cuts to penalty rates and leave entitlements. Those with less than five years' service would receive \$5,000. *Stuff* reported that the Tramways Union, after initially taking a "neutral" stance on the offer, changed its position and labelled the offer a "bribe."

Union secretary Kevin O'Sullivan told *Stuff* on May 18 that the union was "opposed to selling terms and conditions philosophically." He said drivers will not "give up their rates and allowances."

NZ Bus, however, has been emboldened by a pay deal in 2020 covering 800 Auckland drivers, which was accepted by the Tramways Union. The company is now intent on imposing similar conditions on the Wellington drivers.

The offer would have raised the base wage rate from \$19.29 an hour plus allowances to \$22.10 an hour, or to \$24 for drivers with more than six months' service. However, it would gut valuable overtime and penalty rates and reduce annual leave from five weeks to four for new drivers. Weekend penalty rates of time-and-a-half on Saturdays, double time on Sundays and after midnight would be slashed to time-and-a-quarter.

Drivers would lose thousands of dollars annually.

The drivers rejected an offer in April that included a small hourly wage rise and the same attacks on penalty rates, but without an additional "cash payment." A proposed 24-hour strike was met with a lockout by NZ Bus, which was lifted by the Employment Court after the union filed an injunction. NZ Bus owner Next Capital has warned it will not rule out a second lockout over the current deal's rejection.

The Tramways Union is reportedly considering a "free fares" strike in which services will still operate, but drivers will refuse to take payments. O'Sullivan appealed to NZ Bus to return to the bargaining table with a "fair offer" by May 28, or industrial action would resume.

At last Thursday's meeting, workers strongly denounced the company. *Stuff* reported that Koro Hiroki, a driver for three decades, said: "This company, Next Capital, are a bunch of despicable and dishonourable people... We must reject this offer." Ric Woodhouse said: "I feel like I don't matter, and this job isn't worth doing any more."

A driver told the *World Socialist Web Site* the new offer was "rubbish." He said: "The hourly rate they propose is \$24. That's to lose everything else. After a year you get an extra 50 cents." In addition to the cuts to leave and overtime rates, he said, NZ Bus wanted a greater ability to change workers' routes and hours of work at short notice. The company also wanted to remove drivers' taxi allowances, which they need to get to work early in the morning.

Another driver said the workers were very united. "I'm sure that all commuters in Wellington are supporting us in whatever we decide to do. The support that we've got so far is really, really good."

The drivers' determined stand to defend their

conditions is significant. Public transport workers have faced decades-long attacks on their wages and conditions, initiated by the 1984–90 Labour government of Prime Minister David Lange, then carried through by private corporations and local councils seeking to slash costs and maximise profits.

The current employer offensive is bound up with the austerity drive against the working class as a whole, orchestrated by Jacinda Ardern’s Labour-Green Party government. Labour recently announced a three-year pay freeze across the public sector, affecting thousands of workers and establishing a precedent for effective pay cuts in private companies. Over 30,000 nurses have voted to strike on June 9 over a 1.38 percent pay offer, which is below the rate of inflation.

Internationally, the onslaught against the working class has accelerated over the past year, with companies seizing on the coronavirus pandemic to restructure. This has been highlighted in the case of London bus driver David O’Sullivan, who was recently sacked for organising opposition to employers forcing drivers to work in life-threatening conditions during the pandemic.

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 7.6 percent, while the cost of living, especially housing, soared.

Next Capital bought NZ Bus for \$229 million after the GWRC handed over 60 percent of the region’s bus routes to rival Transit Group in mid-2018, resulting in the reduction of NZ Bus routes and hundreds of job losses. Next Capital wants to make profits of 25 percent for its investors, before selling NZ Bus.

Thousands of people have signed online petitions in support of the Wellington drivers. The trade unions, however, have made no effort to unite workers across the country to back them. The unions support the Labour Party, which is responsible for the privatisation of services and the resulting poverty-level wages.

Seeking to divert workers’ anger in a nationalist direction, Council of Trade Unions 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 benign is a fraud. NZ Bus’s actions are only the latest in a string of attacks imposed by councils and transport companies, with the collaboration of the union bureaucracy.

The WSWS and Socialist Equality Group (NZ) urge workers not to place any confidence in the Ardern government, the councils or the trade unions. Bus drivers must link up with workers facing similar attacks, including in the railways, in NZ and internationally.

New organisations are required: rank-and-file committees controlled by the workers themselves and independent of the Labour Party and the unions. The working class must fight to build a new socialist party that has its task the formation of a genuine workers’ government, that will nationalise essential industries, like transport, and place them 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 workers everywhere.



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