

Australia: Hundreds protest Sydney bus route cuts

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Around 400 residents of Sydney's eastern suburbs gathered in Randwick on May 30 to protest looming cuts to bus services in the area.

The proposed changes, which include cutting 25 routes and modifying another 23, are part of the state Liberal-National government's preparations for the privatisation of Region 9, one of the few remaining parts of Sydney with state-operated buses.

Bids for the eight-year contract to operate bus services in Region 9 have now closed, and the tender will be awarded in November. The successful bidder is meant to commence operations in April 2022, completing the shift of all Sydney bus routes to private operation.

At the event, three Labor Party politicians and two trade union bureaucrats postured as opponents of privatisation, as did Tom Kennedy, the Student Representative Council president at the nearby University of New South Wales, who is also a member of the Labor Party.

Marjorie O'Neill, Labor member of parliament for the local electorate of Coogee, told the crowd of mostly older local residents that the cuts were an attempt to force residents on to light rail, "a piece of infrastructure we never wanted that is slow and breaks down continuously."

O'Neill said the rally would send a message "to this awful, awful, abhorrent Liberal government that is ripping out essential services. What we're calling on is an independent commission and inquiry to take place over these cuts, over the light rail and over their privatisation so they can be held to account over all of this."

Such an inquiry could well expose cost blowouts and cosy relationships between politicians and transport companies, but no one would be "held to account." More importantly, such an inquiry would do nothing to address the fundamental issue confronting bus drivers and passengers: Both major parties support privatisation and the inevitable cuts that come from transforming public services into profit-making enterprises.

David Babineau, secretary of the bus and tram division of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), said: "There's going to be less buses. There's going to be less drivers, so we've got job cuts coming."

But Babineau, as well as the local state and federal Labor parliamentary speakers at the event, Michael Daley and Matt Thistlethwaite, framed the issue as one that could be resolved by the removal of the state Liberal-National government.

Thistlethwaite said: "Before the last election, [Premier] Gladys Berejiklian lied to you. She made a commitment to this community when they wanted to win the seat of Coogee, there'd be no privatisation of bus services in our community."

In reality, Labor's posture as a defender of public transport does not bear historical scrutiny. The 2004 Unsworth review, ordered by then Labor Premier Bob Carr, called for the slashing of off-peak bus services and for privatisation. The Carr government also sold off rail freight services and shut down the state's train maintenance workshops and track repair divisions.

Residents attending the rally told WSWS reporters that the impact of the cuts would be felt most sharply by retirees and students.

Ross, 63, from Kensington, commented: "They're expecting people to change bus services, which is going to be hard, particularly for older passengers and people that struggle with mobility issues. And expecting people to hop on one bus and change for another bus, possibly at different bus stops. There is no interchange that really works in terms of light rail apart from Central and Kingsford.

"There's a lot of support for a grassroots issue that isn't being managed well by the government or the opposition."

Last week, Keolis Downer, a French-Australian joint venture, was awarded a \$900 million contract to operate

in Region 7, which covers Sydney’s Northern Beaches and North Shore. While publicly opposing privatisation, the RTBU told its members: “One thing that went our way was that Keolis Downer were [sic] the company to get it.”

The union claims that workers and management “ultimately want the same thing,” based on the “solid working relationship” that Keolis Downer and the RTBU have established in the industrial city of Newcastle, north of Sydney, where the company took over bus services in 2017.

In fact, the privatisation of buses in Newcastle—“cautiously welcomed” by the RTBU at the time—was plagued with problems affecting workers and passengers. Dozens of workers were underpaid for more than eight months after the transition and on-time performance plummeted, leading Keolis Downer to make major changes to routes, including removing around 140 bus stops.

In Sydney’s Inner West (Region 6), Transit Systems took over from the government-owned State Transit in July 2018. In addition to a reduction in on-time performance, the privatisation created a two-tier wage structure for bus drivers in Region 6.

While workers in Region 6 who had previously been employed by State Transit were still covered by the same award, negotiated by the RTBU, new hires are employed under an enterprise agreement brokered between Transit Systems and the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

Under the TWU agreement, workers can be rostered for split shifts spanning up to 13 hours, and straight shifts of up to 11.5 hours (including meal breaks), raising fatigue concerns. Casual workers can be engaged for shifts as short as one hour on weekdays, rather than the three-hour minimum specified in the industrial award.

This was the outcome after the TWU argued before the Fair Work Commission that it, not the RTBU, should be allowed to represent privatised bus drivers in Region 6, on the basis that the TWU had more experience negotiating with private employers.

Likewise, in its enterprise bargaining with major trucking companies, the TWU has excused logistics giants Toll, Linfox, StarTrack and FedEx from any responsibility for workers’ low pay and conditions on the grounds that they are being “sweated” by their clients.

The two-tier, two-union setup in Region 6 is engineered to divide the workforce and suppress any genuine opposition to continued attacks on pay and conditions. While the RTBU has told members “there can never again

be a two-tiered workplace like Region 6,” its only concern is the retention of dues-paying drivers. As for the TWU, it began its membership drive as soon as the privatisation of Regions 7, 8, and 9 was announced.

Petitions and appeals to governments will not provide convenient, affordable public transport for passengers or stable employment with fair pay and conditions for drivers. Neither should workers and residents hold any illusions that the election of a Labor government would resolve these issues.

For decades, the Labor Party at federal and state levels has led the charge to sell off vital public assets—from the Commonwealth Bank to Qantas—creating the conditions for mass job destruction, price increases and service cuts, while creating new profit centres for big business.

The track record of the trade unions shows that, whatever they may claim at rallies, these organisations have no serious objection to privatisation. They have facilitated it at every turn, only competing with each other to sign mutually beneficial deals with the employers, at the expense of the conditions of the remaining workers.

To fight this line-up, what is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees of workers and residents, completely independent of Labor and the unions, to organise opposition and link up with workers internationally confronting similar attacks by governments and the corporate elite. That means building a genuine movement of the working class to fight for public ownership and democratic workers’ control of all critical services, including education, health and transport, that is, for socialism.



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