New Zealand: Wellington bus drivers reject union-backed sellout

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Following a very heated meeting of union members on Wednesday, bus drivers in Wellington voted 150 to 73 to reject a third pay offer from NZ Bus, in opposition to the Tramways Union's formal recommendation to accept it.

This is a major development in the drivers' struggle for decent wages and working conditions. On April 23, about 280 drivers were locked out by NZ Bus after they voted to strike following the rejection of an initial offer that would have slashed annual leave, as well as overtime and weekend pay rates. The following month, drivers rejected a second, basically unchanged offer, and voted in favour of industrial action. The union, however, went back into negotiations.

The drivers' rejection of the third, union-backed offer points to the growing militancy and anger among workers in New Zealand and internationally, who are seeking to fight back against austerity and never-ending attacks on their living standards. In doing so, workers are coming into conflict not only with governments and corporations, but with the trade union bureaucracy that is seeking to isolate and sell out workers' struggles.

The stand taken by NZ Bus drivers follows the June 9 nationwide strike by 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers. The Labour Party-led government is seeking to impose a three-year pay freeze across the public sector to fund its handouts to big business in response to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

NZ Bus is owned by Australian-based private equity company Next Capital, which is seeking to squeeze as much profit as possible from the operation before selling it. Next Capital's website states that it expects a return on investment of 25 percent, which is to be extracted through increased exploitation of workers.

The vote represents a significant shift by workers compared with just a few months ago during the April lockout, when there was little or no open criticism of the union leaders. *Stuff* reported that Wednesday's ratification meeting "saw drivers direct their fury at both the company and the Tramways Union." Driver Koro Hikori denounced the attempt to pressure workers: "At the end of the day we make the decisions, not you. I do not like to be threatened. You do not scare people into signing something they do not want to sign."

Union secretary Kevin O'Sullivan had said the day before: "It's a good offer. It's a much improved offer on what we previously rejected."

In fact, the third offer was a sellout. It included a pay rate of $22.10 an hour, which is falsely promoted as a "living wage" by the trade unions. This is an increase of just over $2 for many drivers, who currently make less than the legal minimum wage of $20 an hour.

The offer would have reduced penal rates, currently time-and-a-half for overtime and double time on weekends, to $30 for overtime and $40 an hour on Sundays and public holidays.

The meagre hourly raise was to be funded, not by the company, but by the Greater Wellington Regional Council, which contracts NZ Bus to provide public transport services. The council, led by the Labour Party's Daran Ponter, offered to subsidise the company's wages bill.

Public transport is in a crisis. Pay and conditions are so abysmal that Wellington's operators—Tranzurban, NZ Bus and Uzabus—cannot find enough drivers, resulting in frequent service cancellations. According to *Stuff*, "the region needed a total of 700 drivers to run the network, and was up to 60 short."

One driver told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the latest offer was "not good, it's not what we were asking for… It's the members that make the decisions,

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not the officials of the union." He added: "I give credit to all my fellow workmates for standing up for their rights today… [The vote showed] our union representatives, as well as the company and the council, that we are not backing down, we are fighting until the end." He believed drivers were prepared to strike until they got what they wanted.

Another driver said: "The union had no right to say that the deal was settled, and that caused a lot of anguish today. What has pissed people off is that this $22.10, the company's not paying that, it's the council. The company's not paying anything." He also noted that NZ Bus was demanding a greater ability to dictate drivers' shift times.

The union announced on June 15 that it had reached an agreement with the company—well before workers had been consulted. The media portrayed this as a done deal, with Radio NZ's Kathryn Ryan falsely stating on June 16 that a "deal has been struck between NZ Bus *and its drivers* " [emphasis added].

The driver said that prior to the vote, the union had circulated a leaflet stating: "Rejection of this offer will leave members with no choice but to engage in drawn-out industrial action which absolutely guarantees no success." This attempt to pressure workers into accepting the sellout only fuelled their anger, he added: "The union got told by some of the drivers how disgusted they are with the outcome. People were asking them: are they on our side?"

At the meeting, he said, union officials told workers "if we didn't accept [the offer] then we'd go on the Auckland contract." The Tramways Union agreed with NZ Bus last year to a major reduction in penal rates for hundreds of drivers in Auckland.

"We told the union to go back to the company and tell them that we want our conditions kept, and the living wage. If not, strike action." However, the officials did not call for any vote on strike action. The union is returning to negotiations with the company and the council.

The Tramways Union's attempt to ram through a pro-company sellout underlines the need for new organisations, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions and the Labour Party, and controlled by workers themselves. The International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the WSWS, has called for the formation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to unite workers' struggles across borders, against the unions' attempts to isolate and defeat them.

Such workplace committees would seek to break the union-imposed isolation of the NZ Bus workers, by uniting with drivers in Auckland, Christchurch and other centres, as well as train workers who are facing similar attacks on their wages and conditions. They would also appeal directly for support from workers in Australia and other countries.

The situation facing drivers raises, above all, the need for a socialist party and perspective, in opposition to the Labour government—which falsely promised to improve wages for public transport and other workers. Public transport and other essential industries must be taken out of the hands of big business and placed under public ownership and workers' control, with tens of billions of dollars invested to expand services, dramatically boost wages and ensure safe working conditions.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on all workers to support the stand taken by NZ Bus workers. We appeal to public transport and other workers to contact us to discuss our perspective and the need to build rank-and-file committees to expand this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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