

The Wellington bus drivers dispute and the case for rank-and-file committees

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)

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More than a week ago, drivers employed by NZ Bus in Wellington voted against a sellout deal hatched by the Tramways Union and management. The offer, the third that the drivers have rejected, would have increased hourly wages to just two dollars above the legal minimum, while cutting overtime and weekend rates.

During the ratification meeting on June 23, drivers angrily denounced the union for promoting the agreement in the media, and for seeking to pressure workers into approving it. Union officials had distributed a memo declaring that if drivers voted against the rotten deal, they would face drawn-out industrial action with no chance of a better offer.

The drivers' vote is part of an emerging rebellion against the trade unions, which long ago ceased to function as defensive organisations of the working class. The unions are controlled by an upper middle class bureaucracy, which collaborates with corporate management and the state, to police the working class and prevent any organised struggle against austerity.

The unions have played a central role, in one country after another, in enforcing government and business demands for the dangerous reopening of schools and factories, before the pandemic has been halted. In London, where more than 60 bus workers have died from COVID-19, the unions have refused to defend driver David O'Sullivan, who was sacked for seeking to uphold workers' rights to health and safety.

In New Zealand, over the past year-and-a-half, the unions helped to organise thousands of redundancies, while the government handed over billions of dollars to corporations, in response to the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The unions promoted the Labour Party in the 2017 and 2020 elections, including its false promises to improve conditions in public transport.

Workers in New Zealand are beginning to fight back against the brutal attacks being imposed by corporations, and the Labour Party-led government of Jacinda Ardern. To expand this struggle, however, new organisations are needed.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on NZ Bus workers to

build a rank-and-file committee, controlled directly by the workers themselves, and independent of the unions. This must become the starting point for the formation of similar committees in different workplaces and industries, to unite workers throughout the country and internationally.

The SEG is fighting to build a new political party, opposed to Labour and all the established parties, and based on the program of socialist internationalism, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The NZ Bus dispute starkly reveals the manner in which the ruling elite relies on the unions to block and demobilise working class opposition. The Tramways Union has made clear, by its statements and actions, that it is working hand-in-hand with NZ Bus, against the interests of drivers. Even though drivers previously voted in favour of strikes, if they failed to get a decent offer, the union has not announced industrial action, declaring that this would be hopeless. Tramways and the other transport unions, First Union and the Rail and Maritime Transport Union, have refused to unify the struggles of transport workers in Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, Tauranga, Hamilton, Dunedin and elsewhere.

Since the Wellington drivers' vote, the Tramways Union, along with the media, has gone completely silent. The Council of Trade Unions, which feigned support for the drivers when they were locked out by the company for 24 hours in April, has also said nothing. Likewise, the various pseudo-left organisations that back the union bureaucracy—the International Socialist Organisation, Organise Aotearoa, and the union-backed *Daily Blog*—have made no comment on the rejection of the sellout.

The blackout is part of a strategy to isolate the drivers from the rest of the working class, in order to create an atmosphere of demoralisation and persuade drivers that they have no alternative but to accept a deal that maintains poverty wages and cuts penalty rates.

To break the isolation of NZ Bus drivers in Wellington, a rank-and-file committee would aim to unite with hundreds of workers employed by the same company in Auckland and

the Bay of Plenty. It would also appeal for support from workers in other bus companies, such as Tranzit and Uzabus, and in the commuter rail network run by Transdev in Auckland and Wellington.

Public transport workers must also call for a united struggle with healthcare workers, teachers and others affected by the three-year wage freeze announced by the government. Two weeks before the bus drivers' vote, 30,000 nurses and other public healthcare workers held a nationwide strike against an offer of a 1.38 percent pay increase. Nurses are currently voting on more strike action, but the New Zealand Nurses Organisation is desperately working with District Health Boards to reach a sellout agreement, as the union did following a national strike in 2018.

The unions have fraudulently portrayed NZ Bus as an exception, with the CTU's Richard Wagstaff declaring in April that the Australian owner, Next Capital, was "out of touch with the way we conduct business in New Zealand." The suggestion that New Zealand-based businesses are kinder is completely false. It was the NZ-owned bus company Tranzit that set the bar for the current attack on NZ Bus workers.

The unions' anti-Australian nationalism is aimed at diverting attention from the real source of attacks on wages and conditions: the capitalist system itself. It is also aimed at dividing NZ workers from those in Australia, who face similar attacks.

To wage a counter-offensive against multinationals like Next Capital requires the mobilisation of workers in Australia, New Zealand, and other countries. The private equity firm invests in numerous Australian-based businesses, with the stated aim of receiving a return of 25 percent. This is achieved by attacking workers' conditions and wages.

One of Next Capital's biggest companies is Lynch Group, the southern hemisphere's largest flower exporter, which employs over 400 people in Australia and 800 in China. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported in March and May 2018 that Lynch's workers in Melbourne and Sydney claimed they had been "bullied, harassed and verbally abused under 'sweatshop' conditions for years, while working at the company's Australian warehouses."

Workers said safety training was neglected as Lynch's management pushed them to process flowers as quickly as possible, with frequent accidents as a result. In response, Lynch Group noted that the National Union of Workers in Australia had never raised any concerns about these conditions. The union's role was to prevent any fight by warehouse workers that would have threatened Lynch's profits.

In its April 23 statement calling for the formation of an

International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the ICFI explained: "For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries, in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions..."

"The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance."

Such a struggle has to be sustained by political leadership, namely, the development of a socialist and internationalist party, based on the working class. The unions' claim that the Ardern Labour government, including its coalition partner, the Greens, represents workers' interests is a lie. It is a capitalist government, overseeing an historic transfer of wealth to the rich. It is responsible for soaring homelessness, a crisis in the education and public healthcare systems, and widespread poverty-level wages.

We call on workers to join and build the Socialist Equality Group into the New Zealand section of the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement. The SEG alone opposes the right-wing Labour Party and its backers in the unions, and their pseudo-left allies, from the standpoint of genuine socialism. This includes the demand for the nationalisation of public transport, under workers' control. Tens of billions of dollars must be redirected to renovate and upgrade transport infrastructure, and provide decent wages and conditions to all workers. These measures must be funded through the expropriation of big businesses that have profited from the running down and gutting of public services.



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