

New Zealand bus driver explains why union-backed sellout was rejected

Tom Peters
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On June 23, hundreds of NZ Bus drivers in Wellington voted to reject a sellout deal hatched between the company and the Tramways Union. It was the third offer rejected by the drivers, who are among the lowest-paid workers in New Zealand, many receiving the minimum wage of \$20 an hour or less.

Since then, the media and the union have remained silent, as union officials re-entered negotiations, keeping workers in the dark. Only some details of the rejected offer were made public. It would have increased wages to \$22.10 per hour, funded not by NZ Bus, but by a subsidy from the Labour Party-led Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), which contracts NZ Bus and other private companies to provide bus services.

The small increase was to be accompanied by cuts to overtime and weekend penalty rates. Currently, drivers are paid double time on Sunday and time-and-a-half for Saturdays and overtime. This would have reduced to \$40 an hour on Sundays and \$30 on Saturdays. Taken as a whole, the deal would have essentially frozen wages, while the cost-of-living soars, especially housing costs.

The stand taken by the drivers is part of a growing fightback by workers internationally. In New Zealand, the Labour Party-led government's wage freeze has led to a nationwide strike by healthcare workers. In every country, the main obstacle is the trade unions, which are working to suppress opposition to pro-corporate restructuring and austerity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a senior Wellington bus driver, who we will call James (not his real name), about why the union-backed offer was rejected. The union did not show workers the full proposed contract. Instead, they were given selected highlights of the change.

"I took one look at the offer... [and] I honestly couldn't believe that it was being presented to us," he said. "We had made a very clear statement to our union executive that the first thing we would never do was to give up any of our conditions, and the offer was a considerable reduction in our conditions."

Despite decades of experience, James still makes only \$20.40 an hour. Under the proposal, he would have lost 80 cents an hour on Sundays and 60 cents on Saturdays. Thanks to the GWRC's wage subsidy, NZ Bus would save \$2.50 an hour from its wages bill for weekend shifts: the company would only have to top up James' Sunday wages by \$17.90, instead of the current \$20.40.

The union also agreed with NZ Bus to end allowances for drivers to take taxis to work. "I know that there are a number of drivers that rely quite heavily on that, and there's no other way to get to work," James said. Many drivers have to travel considerable distances early in the morning. Successive companies that have operated Wellington buses since they were first privatised by the council in 1992 have wanted to get rid of the allowance.

Drivers were particularly angry that the proposed deal would have lengthened the working day, which can already be very long. It included "a clause that said an eight-hour shift could be worked over a 12-hour period," instead of the current maximum of 11 hours. The rejected offer would have allowed NZ Bus to make a driver "work four hours and go on a break for four hours, and when they come back, do another four hours," James said.

James pointed out that in the 1990s almost all bus drivers worked full-time, but now there are many part-timers. "There are no guarantees anywhere [in the offer] that they would create even one full-time shift. I have no faith that they wouldn't have kept all those

part-time shifts and made all the full time shifts into 12-hour shifts.

“To even present to us that last package just blew my mind,” James said, “because drivers had been quite forceful in rejecting the previous one. We told [the union]: if they try and remove anything from our contract, just tell them we’ll go on strike.” Despite having a clear mandate for industrial action, none has been called.

The Tramways Union sought to pressure drivers into taking the pro-company deal by telling them it was the best they would get, and that strike action would be useless. “The message was: this offer is a good one, you should take it, and if you don’t, then on your head be it,” James said. He added that union officials have recently told drivers that they are finalising a better offer with NZ Bus. No details have been released, however.

The driver explained that prior to the privatisation of public transport in the 1990s, drivers had better wages. “To get a job on the buses you had to know someone who would refer you to go on a waiting list to get an appointment. It was that difficult. Now they’ll take anyone, because they’re desperate.” He concluded that “you can’t run a public service and make profit your only goal.”

The public transport system is increasingly run-down. *Stuff* reports that the Wellington region needs about 700 drivers in total, and is currently 60 short. To cope with the shortage, the council agency Metlink will unveil a new timetable on July 25, with 19 services either shortened or cancelled.

A restructure in 2018 saw Tranzit (operating as Tranzurban) take over 60 percent of bus routes, while NZ Bus’s share was reduced to 30 percent. Tranzit won the contract from the GWRC because it slashed labour costs by eliminating penalty rates—setting a benchmark for attacks by other companies.

NZ Bus, which was acquired by Australian-based Next Capital in 2019, has ramped up its attacks on workers over the past two years. Last September, the Tramways Union imposed an agreement on 800 drivers employed by NZ Bus in Auckland, with pay rises of just 2 to 3 percent per year, essentially a pay freeze. The deal maintained conditions worse than those in Wellington, including overtime rates of 1.25 times the ordinary rate, and 1.5 times when a sixth day is worked.

Workdays can be up to 14 hours long.

The transport unions—Tramways, FIRST Union and the Rail and Maritime Transport Union—have refused to carry out a united industrial campaign of all public transport workers throughout the country, let alone nurses and other workers coming into struggle. They are seeking to isolate NZ Bus workers and persuade them to accept a sellout. The unions have also repeatedly promoted illusions in the Labour Party and the Ardern government, which is overseeing a dramatic increase in social inequality and poverty.

The Socialist Equality Group is holding a public meeting on Zoom on Saturday, at 4:00 p.m. NZ time, to discuss the way forward for Wellington bus drivers. It will present the case for new workers’ organisations: rank-and-file committees, independent and opposed to the unions and the Labour Party. Speakers from New Zealand, Britain and Australia will discuss the growing rank-and-file rebellion against the union bureaucracies throughout the world, and the need for a socialist strategy to unify workers internationally. We invite all workers to register here to attend this important meeting.



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