

# Socialist Equality Group holds online meeting on New Zealand bus drivers' dispute

Our reporters  
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The Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand held an important online meeting last Saturday to discuss the way forward for NZ Bus drivers in Wellington, who voted on June 23 to reject a sellout agreement backed by the Tramways Union.

The meeting made the case for building rank-and-file committees, independent and opposed to the unions, to break the isolation of the 280-odd drivers, and to expand the struggle for decent jobs, wages and conditions by linking up with other workers in New Zealand and internationally. It featured speakers from New Zealand, Australia and Britain.

The video of the speeches can be viewed below.

Max Boddy, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, began by drawing attention to the horrific impact of the pandemic, which has killed well over 4 million people. He warned that “the criminal disregard for the health of workers, and the placing of lives before profit,” epitomised by the British government’s homicidal lifting of all restrictions, “finds its expression in every country.”

Boddy warned that Australia and New Zealand remained extremely vulnerable to the coronavirus, which is once again spreading in Australia. Already, governments in both countries have exploited the pandemic “to oversee the destruction of jobs and the funnelling of wealth to the super-rich.” The Wellington bus drivers’ stand was “an expression of the global resurgence of the working class against [the] decades-long assault on working conditions, now accelerated by the pandemic.”

Tom Peters, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group, explained that NZ Bus drivers are among the lowest-paid in the country, receiving close to the minimum wage of \$20 an hour. The Tramways Union backed a deal that would have increased base rates, while reducing overtime, cutting other allowances, and

lengthening the working day.

The drivers’ rejection of this sellout was part of emerging opposition to the pro-business policies of Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party government, which Peters said was “falsely glorified as kind and progressive.” A public sector wage freeze recently provoked a nationwide strike by 30,000 healthcare workers.

Peters explained how governments and corporations were “relying on the trade unions, which are increasingly integrated into the structures of the state and management, to suppress opposition from the working class.”

He quoted from a memo distributed by the Tramways Union to NZ Bus drivers which sought to pressure workers into accepting the sellout, saying otherwise they would lose “public support” and face “drawn out industrial action with absolutely no guarantee of success.” These statements provoked significant anger among drivers.

Discussing the need for workers to rebel against the unions, Peters drew attention to the major strike involving nearly 3,000 workers at Volvo Truck in the US state of Virginia. Workers there established a rank-and-file committee to oppose both the company and the United Auto Workers union, which last week betrayed the strike using anti-democratic methods to impose a sellout deal. The rank-and-file committee, assisted by the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the WSWs, exposed the rotten manoeuvres of the union and served as a voice for ordinary workers; it also gained international support, including from Volvo Car workers in Belgium.

Peters denounced the nationalist statements by Council of Trade Unions leader Richard Wagstaff, who suggested that NZ-based employers were better than Australian-based Next Capital, which owns NZ Bus. In opposition to the unions’ efforts to stoke xenophobia to divide workers, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) called for the unification of workers through an

international network of rank-and-file committees.

James, a worker in Wellington's commuter train network, operated by French-based multinational Transdev, explained that rank-and-file committees would fight to unify all public transport workers in opposition to the unions that seek to divide them. He summarised the history of privatisation of rail and bus services, beginning with the 1980s Labour Party government of David Lange. Local councils, including the Labour-led Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), had outsourced services to companies such as NZ Bus and Transdev to slash costs and generate profits at the expense of workers.

Labour's "election-time" promises to oppose privatisation have repeatedly "proved to be completely worthless," James said. He called for workers to take up the fight for socialism, including the public ownership of transport services, under workers' control.

The meeting was also addressed by David O'Sullivan, a bus driver in the UK and member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, which was founded to oppose the life-threatening working conditions enforced by the companies and the union bureaucracy.

On January 4, 2021, O'Sullivan was sacked for informing workers of the dangers they faced. The Unite union "provided trumped-up evidence to help get me sacked; they falsely claimed that I was taking unlawful strike action," he said. O'Sullivan described the unions as the "police force on behalf of the companies and the government. The word 'union' is a misnomer, it should be called 'disunion.'"

"At least 60 bus drivers have already died of COVID, and all of these, one must say, were preventable deaths," O'Sullivan said. "The trade unions have worked with the government throughout the pandemic" and had "forced workers back into unsafe workplaces after the first lockdown ended." The Unite union even told workers they did not need face masks and other PPE.

The speeches were followed by an animated discussion.

One worker from NZ Bus asked how the global pandemic was relevant to the Wellington dispute. Peters replied that the pandemic had both intensified the assault on workers and demonstrated the reactionary role of the unions. The NZ unions, he warned, "would react the same way [as their counterparts in Britain] if there was a severe outbreak of COVID-19 that started killing dozens of workers."

In response to a question about how workers could replace Tramways Union leader Kevin O'Sullivan, Peters said the problem was not simply bad leaders, but the trade

union "form of organisation," which had become "totally integrated into the structures of the capitalist system." Rank-and-file organisations were needed to facilitate democratic discussions among workers, share information, and link up with nurses and other sections of workers.

Responding to a question about the risks of victimisation that workers faced if they spoke out alone against the bureaucracy, several speakers said that this was a real danger, which showed the need for a rank-and-file committee, and that the SEG stood ready to assist workers in forming such a committee. David O'Sullivan stressed the importance of international collaboration and said the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee could provide advice to workers in New Zealand and Australia based on its experiences.

SEG member John Braddock said the "isolation" felt by NZ Bus workers was a result of deliberate actions by the unions, which "go out of their way to keep workers separated from each other, from other workers in the same industry, and from other workers coming into struggle."

Braddock added that workers were confronted with political tasks, not "simply rank-and-file activity connected with their immediate workplace." A socialist party had to be built, as the New Zealand section of the ICFI, to politically break workers from the Labour Party and the unions.

Tony Hyland, a member of the Socialist Equality Party in the UK, said the pandemic was fuelling anti-capitalist sentiment and that "workers want to fight," but the question was what political perspective they should adopt. "The corporations and the government are ruthless opponents," he said. "The only way they can be countered is if the working class has its own strategy," based on mobilising "as a social force across national boundaries." Workers in New Zealand and at NZ Bus had to recognise that they were part of a global fight against capitalism.



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