

New Zealand: Vote no to sellout of Wellington bus drivers! Form rank-and-file committees!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The Socialist Equality Group calls for Wellington bus drivers to decisively reject the new draft collective employment agreement (CEA), hatched by NZ Bus and the Tramways Union.

This is the fourth deal presented to bus drivers since April. Most recently, on June 23, drivers rejected a sellout agreement backed by the union, which would have reduced overtime and weekend penalty rates, scrapped taxi allowances and lengthened the standard broken shift working day from 11 to 12 hours.

Acting on behalf of NZ Bus, the Tramways Union falsely told drivers there was no chance of a better offer, and they would lose “public support” if they went on strike. Drivers, who had repeatedly voted in favour of strike action, reacted angrily to the union’s efforts to pressure them into accepting the blatantly pro-company deal.

The “no” vote on June 23 was a significant development. It was part of the growing class struggle within New Zealand and internationally. Increasingly, workers are coming into conflict with corporations, the Labour Party-led government and the unions that act as accomplices in seeking to enforce austerity and cutbacks. Coinciding with the NZ Bus drivers’ vote, some 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers are voting this week on a sellout offer, backed by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, which is in line with the Ardern government’s public sector pay freeze.

Wellington drivers took a determined stand against any reduction in their wages and conditions, in opposition to significant pressure from the company, the union, the media and the political establishment to accept. Now is not the time to back down.

The latest agreement was emailed to members on July 25, leaving only four days for workers to study it ahead of a ratification meeting on July 29. In a message to union members, Tramways Union secretary Kevin O’Sullivan claimed that “all the issues that arose at the meeting of 23rd June have been addressed and all current terms and conditions have been carried over to the new agreement along with a substantial pay increase.”

This is completely misleading. First of all, the new CEA, while it maintains the taxi allowance and does not lengthen hours, keeps drivers on poverty-level wages and many on grueling 11-hour working days, in which they are paid for just 8 hours. Over the next four years, NZ Bus will increase annual pay rates by just 2 percent or the official inflation rate, whichever is greater.

As with the deal that was rejected last month, the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) has agreed to subsidise NZ Bus to top up drivers’ base wages to \$NZ22.10 (\$US15.39), rising to \$22.75 in September.

The union-backed “Living Wage Movement” website claims that this rate allows workers “to pay for the necessities of life and participate as an active citizen in the community.” In fact, it is barely above the \$20 hourly minimum wage that most drivers currently receive, plus or minus a few cents.

Even GWRC chairman Daran Ponter, a Labour Party member, admitted to Radio NZ on June 16 that the “living wage” was “not sustainable” given the high cost of living. According to Trade Me Property, the median weekly rent in Wellington is \$595, up 8 percent in the past year alone, and not much less than the minimum weekly wage after tax.

There is not even a guarantee that drivers will get the “living wage” for more than one year. The draft CEA states that if NZ Bus and the council cannot agree on suitable “funding arrangements” by September 3, 2022, then wages will be lifted by only 2 percent to \$23.20 per hour, “even if the Living Wage is higher.”

The union’s claim that the new offer retains “all current terms and conditions” is false.

Drivers will no longer be paid time-and-a-half for overtime and Saturdays, and double time for Sundays. The draft CEA spells out that “the Living Wage Adjustment Payment is not payable on hours worked after 8 each day; or after 40 each week; or in the weekends, or on any other hours where overtime or penalty rates are payable.”

Overtime and weekend rates will be based on the company’s base rates, without the council’s top-up. A

driver paid \$22.10 an hour during the week will receive slightly more than \$40 on Sundays, instead of \$44.20 if the “Living Wage Adjustment Payment” were applied. Drivers will effectively be doing the same work for two separate base rates, depending on when they work.

Workers should reject with contempt the company’s claim that it can’t afford to pay them decently. NZ Bus is owned by the transnational private equity firm Next Capital, based in Australia, which manages over \$600 million in funds. It buys and sells companies, in both countries, with the stated aim of making a return on investment of 25 percent for its wealthy shareholders. This is achieved at the expense of jobs, working conditions and wages.

The NZ Bus dispute has starkly exposed the role of the unions as the enforcers of these attacks. These are not workers’ organisations, but privileged bureaucracies that work hand-in-hand with big business and government against the working class.

As the Socialist Equality Group explained in our recent online meeting, the Tramways Union and other unions worked from the outset to systematically isolate NZ Bus drivers and convince them there was no hope of fighting for a decent agreement.

One driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “If there was a bit more united front from the entire driving community, we could be a lot more forceful.”

There are five public transport companies contracted by the GWRC—NZ Bus, Transit, Ubus, Mana Coach Services and commuter rail operator Transdev—whose workers are all on similarly low wages and unsociable shifts. The unions have ensured that there is no unified industrial campaign by all these workers.

The Tramways Union also refused to mobilise hundreds of NZ Bus workers in Auckland and Bay of Plenty, whose conditions are even worse than those in Wellington. Nor was any appeal made for a unified struggle with nurses and tens of thousands of other public sector workers affected by the Ardern government’s wage freeze.

The Council of Trade Unions (CTU) sought to whip up nationalism during the dispute, focusing on NZ Bus’s Australian owner, and implying that somehow NZ businesses were kinder. This propaganda aimed to divert attention from the real source of the attacks: the drive for increased profits by all businesses, including those in New Zealand. The unions seek to divide NZ workers from their counterparts in Australia, in order to prevent any united struggle against transnational employers like Next Capital.

The CTU also falsely claimed that the Labour government was behind the drivers. In fact, the government has done precisely nothing to improve drivers’ wages and conditions since it was first elected in 2017. This did not prevent the

unions from telling workers to re-elect it in 2020.

The Socialist Equality Group calls for a rank-and-file rebellion against the unions, and a complete political break from the Labour Party, as the first steps in organising a real fight against corporate and government austerity.

The way forward is shown by workers internationally who have formed rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the union bureaucracy, and controlled democratically by workers themselves.

In the UK, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee has fought to oppose the life-threatening conditions that are being imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the collaboration of the trade unions. More than 60 bus drivers have died in London alone.

In Virginia, in the US, Volvo Truck workers organised a rank-and-file committee to oppose the United Auto Workers union’s efforts to sell out the recent strike by almost 3,000 workers. After workers three times rejected the union’s pro-company agreements, the union finally rammed through a similar agreement this month, exposing itself as a part of corporate management.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has called for an international alliance of such committees, in order to coordinate workers’ struggles across borders. A global strategy, in opposition to the unions’ nationalist poison, is essential to break the isolation of workers coming into struggle and to defeat the multinational corporations.

A rank-and-file committee of NZ Bus workers would demand an immediate pay increase and better conditions that actually meet workers’ needs—not those of the company and the union bureaucrats. It would fight to forge links with public transport workers, nurses and others throughout New Zealand, Australia and other countries.

Above all, a real fight must be guided by socialist demands, including for the public ownership of all transport services and tens of billions of dollars to upgrade infrastructure, provide high-paying, secure jobs and free transport services for all. This funding must be gained from the billions of dollars hoarded by the rich, including the banks and private equity firms, which have continued to profit throughout the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.



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