

Union sells out New Zealand bus drivers

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Following an extremely tense meeting on Thursday, July 29, bus drivers in Wellington voted narrowly to approve a sellout collective employment agreement (CEA) hatched by NZ Bus and the Tramways Union.

Union secretary Kevin O’Sullivan told *Stuff* that approximately 65 percent of drivers voted in favour, but did not give exact figures. However, the *World Socialist Web Site* has been told that there were 129 votes for the CEA and 93 against, i.e. 58 percent in favour and 42 percent against. It is unclear whether anyone abstained, but some drivers reported as many as 22 paper ballots were not filled out. If these workers did not vote, it would mean only 53 percent supported the CEA.

Drivers had overwhelmingly rejected three previous offers since April, including one backed by the union on June 23 that would have lengthened working hours, scrapped taxi allowances and reduced penal rates. At the time, Tramways Union insisted the offer was the best drivers would ever get and any strike action would be hopeless.

This provoked outrage from drivers. Their rejection of the June 23 union-backed offer was part of the growing fightback by workers internationally against corporate and government austerity, and the corporatist unions. Following the latest bus drivers’ vote, it was confirmed that about 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers had rejected a sellout agreement backed by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation.

O’Sullivan told *Stuff* that under the new deal with NZ Bus “our existing terms and conditions were enshrined, with a substantial pay increase... We’ve got the result we wanted.” Company chief executive Jay Zmijewski similarly declared: “This is a great outcome.” He falsely said drivers would have the best pay and conditions in the industry.

The union bureaucracy and the company may have got what they wanted, but the CEA is a sellout, which was only pushed through in the face of significant opposition from drivers. While it removed the longer shifts and attacks on allowances, it is still a pro-company deal.

One driver told the WSWs that the union’s claim of a “complete rollover of terms and conditions,” echoed by the media, was “a blatant lie.” He said: “It’s scandalous to me that O’Sullivan and his sycophants accepted and promoted

this offer, paving the way for further erosion of our penal rates.” Drivers had been fighting “not only the company and GWRC [Greater Wellington Regional Council], but also fighting our own union secretary.”

At Thursday’s meeting the union invited NZ Bus management and the council chairman Daran Ponter (a Labour Party member) to address the drivers. “There was a lot of shouting, a lot of anger towards management. We didn’t invite management, [Kevin O’Sullivan] did,” one member explained. Some drivers were calling for O’Sullivan’s resignation.

One driver said chief executive Zmijewski “completely lied to the drivers about how they’d never wanted to break up the CEA, about how they wanted to give drivers a better pay rise, and how they respected them. It was actually laughable.” Several drivers complained during the meeting about how the company had repeatedly failed to pay its workers correctly, including during last year’s lockdown.

The same driver said they had tried to speak in the meeting against the deal, but were not allowed to do so. Some drivers walked out in disgust at how the meeting was being conducted.

The new agreement will increase drivers’ pay from around \$20 an hour—which is the legal minimum wage—to \$22.10, rising to \$22.75 in September. This is falsely described by the unions as a “living wage,” despite being little more than the minimum and completely outstripped by the rising cost of living. Drivers will remain among the lowest-paid workers in the country.

The pay increase does not apply to penal rates, which were previously time-and-a-half for overtime and Saturdays, and double time for Sunday shifts. The base rates used to calculate pay for these shifts will remain effectively frozen. For the first time ever, drivers will be doing the same job for two separate base rates, depending on what hours they work.

One driver was concerned about the “precedent” this would set. He told the WSWs: “Other companies will see it and say: ‘Hey, we don’t have to pay time-and-a-half and double time on what we’re paying our staff now. We can give you time-and-a-half and double time, but it’s based on the minimum wage.’”

Drivers are also angry that the top up to \$22.10 on standard base rates is being funded by the GWRC, not NZ Bus. The company absurdly claimed it could only afford to increase pay rates by 2 percent or the rate of inflation.

NZ Bus is one of five companies contracted by the council to provide transport services at the lowest possible cost. It is owned by Australian private equity firm Next Capital, which aims to squeeze as much profit as possible from the company before selling it.

Another driver opposed to the CEA noted that the GWRC had told the public it was reducing the number of gruelling split shifts, but a proposed roster distributed to drivers actually showed that these were increasing. These shifts are typically 11 hours long, with a three hour unpaid break.

The same driver had written a letter to the GWRC, which she printed off and distributed to other drivers. It pointed out that drivers would be receiving \$32.23 an hour “if we were still 61% above minimum wage as we were in 1990,” before public transport services were privatised by the council.

She also noted that even low-paid ticket clippers employed on Wellington’s commuter rail network by multinational company Transdev were receiving more than bus drivers: \$22.26 per hour plus penal rates, including double time of \$44.52 on Sundays.

The NZ Bus-Tramways Union deal slashing penal rates could now open the door for Transdev to attempt to do the same. Transdev took over the GWRC contract for the rail network in 2016 and since then, with the assistance of the Rail and Maritime Transport Union, has suppressed wages and implemented a number of redundancies.

NZ Bus drivers have repeatedly voted for industrial action, but this has not been acted on by the union, aside from a one-day strike that resulted in a lockout by the company on April 23. The next day, Tramways resumed negotiations and drivers returned to work. During the July 29 meeting, O’Sullivan once again sought to pressure drivers by declaring that a strike would be impossible to sustain and would cripple them financially.

The unions have sought to keep each section of transport workers isolated from each other and the rest of the working class. Despite the Council of Trade Unions claiming during the lockout that the entire union movement supported the drivers, there was no attempt made to mount a joint industrial campaign involving other transport workers, let alone nurses and others who are facing attacks on wages and conditions.

Meanwhile, the unions have also promoted illusions in the Labour Party-led government of Jacinda Ardern, which is overseeing an historic transfer of wealth to the rich, a housing crisis, and soaring poverty and inequality.

The Tramways Union’s collaboration with corporate

management, and its hostility to any fight to break the isolation of NZ Bus drivers, was starkly revealed in its attempts to intimidate opponents of the sellout deal, including the Socialist Equality Group (SEG).

The day before the members voted, a delegate named Rick, a supporter of the union leadership, shouted abuse at SEG members who were speaking to drivers outside the Kilbirnie depot and distributing a statement calling for a no vote. Rick declared that they were “trespassing” on the company’s “private property” and he would call the police.

The delegate disappeared inside the depot and a police officer arrived a few minutes later. A bus driver, who was speaking with the SEG members at the time, defended their right to be there and campaign for their positions, and expressed disgust with the delegate’s behaviour.

The NZ Bus dispute contains important lessons for the entire working class. Under conditions of the most severe crisis of capitalism in decades, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the unions in every country are acting as a police force for corporations and the state to enforce ever deeper attacks on wages and conditions.

To organise a real fight against these attacks, the International Committee of the Fourth International has called for a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. These organisations, controlled democratically by workers themselves, would break the isolation imposed by the unions by sharing information and forging links with other workers both nationally and internationally, who are coming into struggle. They would raise demands that actually meet workers’ needs and not the limitations imposed by companies and governments.

Above all, the SEG calls on workers to adopt a socialist perspective in opposition to Labour and every other established party. This includes the demand for the public ownership of transport and other essential industries, under the democratic control of the working class, and with a major injection of funding to provide decent services and well-paid, secure jobs.

We urge workers who agree with this perspective to contact us.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact