

New Zealand bus drivers underpaid and unvaccinated

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Drivers at NZ Bus in Wellington have told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were underpaid during the latest COVID-19 lockdown, just as they were last year. They are also concerned about the lack of urgency in organising bus drivers to be vaccinated.

New Zealand entered a nationwide lockdown on August 18 to suppress an outbreak of the highly-infectious and potentially lethal Delta variant of the coronavirus. As of yesterday, there were 694 active cases associated with the outbreak, and 25 cases among travellers returned from overseas.

Almost all the cases are in Auckland, which remains in a strict “level 4” lockdown, but there are nine cases in the Wellington region, where restrictions have largely been lifted and businesses and schools reopened as of today. There remains a risk that the outbreak could spread, given that tens of thousands of people are permitted to travel between Auckland and the rest of the country.

During the lockdown, bus services in Wellington continued to operate on a reduced schedule to transport “essential workers,” such as healthcare and supermarket staff. Drivers, including those not required to work, or not working because they are more susceptible to COVID-19, were initially told that they would continue to be paid what they would normally receive.

This has not happened, as three drivers told the WSWs. Their names have been changed for this article.

Jess said: “What I’m hearing is all drivers are just being paid at that flat eight hour [daily] rate, even if they’re normally rostered on a shift for 8.5 hours, or whatever it is.”

Drivers for NZ Bus and Tranzurban were similarly underpaid during last year’s lockdown, in March-April 2020. Both companies received subsidies to pay their

wages from the government and the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), which contracts them to provide public transport services. Many months after the lockdown, some drivers had still not been paid what they were owed.

Another driver, Rob, said that “some drivers are missing out on 45 minutes of pay” every day. He described the company as “crooks” who were using the pandemic “to exploit the drivers. They’re holding on to our money. They did it last year, they got berated for it and now they’re doing it again. This isn’t an accident, this is a finance company, they know exactly what they’re doing.” NZ Bus is owned by Australian-based private equity firm Next Capital.

A third driver, Jack, told the WSWs, “I tend to work long hours and lots of overtime. It means that I pay the credit card bills down quicker, pay bills faster and save money for the future.” During the lockdown, drivers have missed out on these much-needed overtime payments.

Rob said management had told drivers they would eventually receive a top up to make up for wages lost during the lockdown, but there is no clear indication of when this will happen. He said: “I cannot understand why there hasn’t been any intervention” either by the Tramways Union or the Commerce Commission. The union has remained silent and has not updated its website since August 4.

Rob said many drivers were “disenchanted” with the union leadership, particularly following a sellout pay deal pushed through in July with a narrow majority. “I’ve already spoken to drivers who voted for the offer and they’re regretting it,” he said. Under the agreement, NZ Bus continues to pay drivers close to the minimum wage, while receiving a subsidy from the GWRC to lift base rates by just over \$2 an hour. In

addition, overtime and weekend pay rates are being eroded.

Rob said drivers were “disgusted” with the company’s recent newspaper recruitment ad, which declared that drivers were getting “exciting opportunities” and “great rewards.” The ad was shared on Facebook by the Council of Trade Unions to help the company recruit. NZ Bus remains drastically understaffed because of its low wages and poor conditions, which have failed to keep up with soaring housing and other living costs.

Drivers also expressed concern about their safety during the pandemic. Two of those who spoke to the WSWs were not vaccinated. Jess said, “We’ve all been concerned for months that we’re not in one of the essential worker priority groups” for vaccination. She had not yet received her first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

Nationwide, less than one third of the population is fully vaccinated, leaving New Zealand highly vulnerable to the virus. Drivers were not made a priority, despite being among the most exposed workers, coming into contact with hundreds or thousands of people every day. “Our buses aren’t great for ventilation, you’re not sealed off or anything,” Jess said.

Jack said that the company had told drivers they can book a vaccination “but when I booked in to have one, I can’t get one until the 16th [of September]. So we’re not getting priority. We’re supposed to be essential workers. If we get infected, how many people are we going to infect?”

He said it should be a simple matter for the company, working with the health authorities, to organise everyone to be vaccinated. The fact that this hadn’t happened “feels like just another way that they disrespect drivers... No one has actually told us: thank you for, in the middle of this outbreak, putting yourself out there and risking your own health.”

Jack expressed shock at the large number of deaths among bus drivers internationally. As the WSWs reported in May, at least 60 had lost their lives in London alone. Those who spoke out about the lack of safety measures have been ignored or victimised, including driver David O’Sullivan, who was sacked.

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” Jack said. “It does show that the more a company’s focused on money and greed than people, the more COVID will affect it. Mind

you, it’s the drivers who pay the price. I think management’s fine.” He praised London drivers for forming a rank-and-file safety committee and “standing up to management and saying: that’s enough.”

The situation facing NZ Bus workers is far from unique. There are reports that relief teachers and other irregular or casual workers are going without any pay during the lockdown. The Labour Party-led government is providing millions of dollars in subsidies for businesses, ostensibly to pay staff, but companies receiving the cash can still cut wages by 20 percent.

The trade unions, which function as an arm of management, have not organised any industrial campaign against these attacks. The Socialist Equality Group calls on public transport and other workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to organise a fight against austerity and for decent wages and conditions, and to campaign for safety for workers during the pandemic.



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