

Australia: Western Sydney bus drivers walk out over COVID-19

Martin Scott
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Around 180 bus drivers in Sydney's southwest walked off the job last Thursday afternoon in opposition to unsafe COVID-19 conditions and the ending of regular testing of workers.

The snap strike took place after workers learned that a driver at the Smithfield depot had tested positive for COVID-19. The previous week, more than 70 workers were deemed close or casual contacts of another confirmed case at the nearby Hoxton Park depot, also part of "Region 3" of the city's bus network, operated by Transit Systems.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) ensured the stoppage was ended in less than 24 hours, extracting a promise from management to implement rapid antigen testing for all drivers at the Smithfield depot starting today.

The walk-out is part of a growing wave of hostility in the working class to the criminal, pro-business response to the pandemic by state and federal governments. The swift termination of the strike by the TWU was motivated by the fears within the ruling elite and its trade union accomplices that any prolonged action could be the spark for a much broader movement.

For 18 months, workers in sectors including transport, warehousing, manufacturing, retail and health have been forced to work in unsafe conditions, while at the same time being subjected to wage freezes and job cuts enforced by the unions.

With daily infections averaging almost 1,400, and the state's hospital system in crisis, New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian continues to insist that schools and businesses must reopen and all lockdown measures must be lifted, beginning next month.

Hundreds of ICU nurses last week signed an open letter to the state government demanding immediate action to increase staffing levels, stating: "We do not want to see our patients die from understaffing."

The NSW government's abandonment of surveillance testing of "essential" workers is part of a broader strategy to hide the real extent of the pandemic and the role that the state's inadequate safety restrictions continue to play in the spread of the coronavirus.

Berejiklian announced Friday that she will no longer conduct daily press briefings on the COVID-19 situation, despite acknowledging that case numbers will surge in the coming weeks and months. The state had already drastically reduced the reporting of known COVID-19 exposure sites, and workplace infections—the main source of transmission—have been consciously suppressed from the outset.

In line with the demands of big business and the corporate press, and with the support of the national cabinet, Berejiklian has falsely promoted vaccination as a silver bullet against COVID-19. This has been used to justify the imminent lifting of all safety restrictions and the full reopening of businesses and schools, along with the insistence that the population must "learn to live with the virus"—i.e., accept widespread illness and mass death—in the interests of corporate profit.

In a media release issued on Friday celebrating the "massive win" of rapid antigen testing, the TWU said, "it should never have come to this." Absolving the private operator of responsibility for the health and safety of workers, the union stated: "The NSW Government can't keep leaving this to the private operators to deal with – they need to fund rapid antigen testing in every bus depot across Sydney."

On Monday September 6, bus drivers at four depots in Western Sydney carried out two-hour stoppages in response to the state government removing the requirement for regular COVID-19 testing of workers who live in one of the 12 local government areas (LGAs) of concern where transmission has been high, but work in a different LGA. The workers were calling on the government to implement rapid antigen testing of *all* public transport workers, regardless of their home address or vaccination status.

While bus drivers across Sydney all confront the danger of COVID-19 infection on a daily basis, no such requirement for regular testing has been established elsewhere than the Smithfield depot. Prior to shutting down last week's strike, the TWU did not even demand that the same measures be introduced at Hoxton Park, or at any of Transit Systems' four "Region 6" depots, although all are either located within NSW Health's LGAs "of concern" or have been the site of publicly reported COVID-19 infections.

In mid-August, at least 560 transport workers were in isolation as close or casual contacts of confirmed cases, including more than 200 at the Leichhardt depot and around 50 based at Tempe, both in Region 6.

The TWU's declaration of victory after testing was promised at a single depot is a sharp demonstration of the union-enforced balkanisation of workers in Sydney's almost entirely privatised bus network, a complex array of ten contractors as well as the government-owned State Transit. Both the TWU and the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) have coverage over different

sections of the workforce.

Expressing its complete lack of concern for the health and safety of workers during the pandemic, the RTBU has made no public comment about the Smithfield stoppage. This is particularly noteworthy given that Sydney Trains and NSW Trains workers, who face similar dangers to bus drivers and are also represented by the RTBU, are currently engaged in protection action over a new enterprise agreement. So far this “action” has been limited to “Mischief Saturday,” in which workers were invited to use public address systems to “tell the world the most important claim to you,” and the wearing of union apparel at work this week.

TWU NSW State Secretary Richard Olsen raised last week: “The NSW Government can’t rely on vaccines alone to keep bus drivers and passengers protected from COVID.” The TWU statement noted that “several vaccinated bus drivers” had recently tested positive after working while infectious and that “in at least one of these cases, the driver only got tested because he was unaware that the mandatory surveillance testing requirements were no longer in force.”

These comments are entirely cynical coming from a union that has done as much as, if not more than, the government to keep workers on the job throughout the pandemic, building upon years of collaboration with private transport companies against the interests of workers.

The TWU, along with the RTBU and numerous other unions, has repeatedly opposed the introduction of even marginal COVID-19 restrictions and safety measures, along with mandatory vaccination for transport workers, despite broad support for them in the working class. For example:

- On July 17, Berejiklian announced that workers (other than in health or emergency services) residing in LGAs of concern (then limited to Fairfield, Canterbury-Bankstown and Liverpool) would not be able to work outside their LGA. The TWU responded by demanding: “ALL essential transport workers must be automatically exempt from panicked snap restrictions from the NSW Government.” This exemption was granted.

- On August 20 the NSW government declared that, from August 30, workers in LGAs of concern would only be allowed to work outside their LGA if they had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine or their workplace implemented rapid antigen testing.

- On August 27, the vaccine deadline was extended to September 6 and the exemption for rapid antigen testing was removed.

- On September 1, the RTBU stated: “The Union is pushing for a return to Rapid testing and standard COVID testing as options.... Ultimately, the decision of when to be vaccinated is a personal one, and the beliefs that underpin that decision are also personal.”

- Also on September 1, the RTBU complained: “Last week the RTBU, working with the MUA and TWU secured an exemption for Transport Workers for the Rapid Testing deadline, with the standard COVID test put back in. Then just hours later the Government changed it’s mind and vaccinations were made mandatory for Authorised Workers who live in LGAs of concern.[sic]”

- On September 5, the vaccine deadline was extended to

September 19. The RTBU posted on Facebook: “Congratulations to Unions NSW for fighting for this sensible delay. We’ll continue our fight to ensure testing regimes are in all workplaces to allow all transport workers to continue to earn a living.”

None of these measures apply to transport workers who live outside of the LGAs of concern, regardless of the location of their depot or their route. This means that, even accepting the premise that the virus is limited to these areas—which it is not—unvaccinated drivers who are potentially exposed to COVID-19 on a daily basis will continue to work without any requirement for regular testing.

It is clear that these publicly reported instances of COVID-19 among transport workers represent a mere fraction of workplace infections. Governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, big business, the corporate media and the unions are working hand-in-hand to conceal such outbreaks in order to ensure operations and profits continue with minimal disruption. At the same time, these organisations are promoting illusions that vaccinations are a silver bullet which will allow all other restrictions and safety precautions to be torn down.

The experiences of the last 18 months demonstrate that workers can only defend their health and lives through a rebellion against the unions, which have functioned as a political and industrial police force of governments and corporations. Having imposed the dictates of governments and the corporations for decades, the unions have responded to the pandemic by backing massive cash handouts to big business, by deepening the assault on workers’ jobs and conditions, and by forcing those they falsely claim to represent into unsafe workplaces.

Workers must make a conscious break with these corporatised organisations. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are the only means of protecting health and lives and fighting against the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions.

Such committees would serve as a forum for democratic discussion among workers, enable the sharing of information across industries and throughout the working class and the planning of joint action, including strikes, against the profit-driven reopening drive and the criminal handling of the pandemic by the ruling class.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to contact us to discuss this perspective and to report COVID-19 infections at their workplace.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact