

Thousands more Australian truck drivers to strike as COVID-19 pandemic accelerates health and safety crisis

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted freight transport in Australia and accelerated the major transportation companies' drive to outsource and downsize their full-time workforces. Last year, the pandemic was used by management and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) as a pretext to delay enterprise bargaining and freeze wages.

The continued squeezing of drivers as revenue increases for trucking companies is generating widespread discontent within the transport industry, which the TWU is seeking to diffuse.

On August 27, more than 4,000 Toll drivers walked off the job for 24 hours. This was the first major strike by trucking industry workers after at least a decade of suppression by the union bureaucracy and the first ever mass strike at Toll.

In the three weeks since the strike, the TWU has called no further action at Toll, stating only that "more strikes are possible" following a meeting scheduled for Tuesday. This indicates that management and the union are hoping the lone 24-hour strike, deliberately engineered to ensure minimal disruption to supply chains, was enough to vent workers' anger and pave the way for a sell-out deal.

Around 2,000 drivers at StarTrack plan to strike for 24 hours on Thursday to demand equal pay for labour hire workers and caps on outsourcing. In addition, 4,000 FedEx drivers voted last Friday for protected industrial action and a further 2,000 drivers at Linfox and its subsidiary BevChain are also in the process of voting on industrial action.

Major transport companies have seen their revenues spike during the pandemic. Toll's annual revenue increased by almost one third to \$6.3 billion for the 12 months to June, while StarTrack, Australia Post's most profitable division, contributed to a 10.3 percent jump in company revenues to \$8.27 billion for the same period. Despite this, transport drivers have had to deal with stagnant wages and longer shifts, as well as lost pay due to delays at border crossings and mandatory COVID-19 testing stations.

While the public health measures haphazardly put in place

on a state-by-state basis fall far short of what is necessary to eliminate the current Delta variant outbreak, they have left drivers with a more dangerous and stressful workplace.

Drivers who live in the Greater Sydney region of New South Wales (NSW) must get tested for COVID-19 every seven days. Drivers in southwestern and western Sydney are required to get tested every three days.

Most truck drivers are not provided paid leave to get vaccinated. Drivers are also having difficulty finding locations to rest or get a hot meal and a shower, with many truck stops closed or refusing to serve interstate workers during lockdowns.

Now the federal and state governments are preparing to abandon these limited measures in line with the reopening demands of the capitalist ruling class, with the full support of the unions.

The TWU recently wrote to the "National Cabinet," a de facto coalition government comprising Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state and territory leaders, mostly from the Labor Party, urging it to establish a "COVID-Safe National Transport Roadmap" as part of the ruling elite's reopening drive.

The letter calls for the establishment of rapid testing hubs and paid leave for vaccinations. It warns that: "Any move to reopen the country without shoring up our health defences risks further debilitating lockdowns, restrictions and economic disruption."

This makes clear that the TWU's call for "health defences" is not about protecting the health of workers, their families, or the population as a whole, but ensuring COVID-19 outbreaks do not inconvenience businesses or disrupt profits.

In reality, the health situation facing workers in Australia is dire. State governments in NSW and Victoria are preparing to end lockdowns next month, incessantly repeating in the media that the population must "learn to live with the virus."

The TWU's utter disregard for the health of its members is in line with the union's response to the July introduction of heightened lockdown measures by the NSW government. The TWU and other unions immediately joined business leaders in lobbying for exemptions, forcing workers back on the job in the state's most dangerous coronavirus "hotspots."

Even before the pandemic, transport, postal and warehousing ranked as the most dangerous industry in Australia.

Last month, two drivers were killed when their trucks collided and caught fire in the early hours of August 27, the same day as the Toll strike. Preliminary investigations have found that fatigue was almost certainly a factor.

During a three-week period in August, 18 people were killed in road accidents, including five truck drivers.

During the 12 months to June, 159 people died in accidents involving heavy trucks, a 2.6 percent increase on the previous 12-month period.

Many of these deaths are the result of driver fatigue, endemic among workers who depend on constant overtime to make ends meet, and could be prevented if workers' health and safety were prioritised over corporate profits.

The road death toll is further fuelled by increased demand on supply chains as lockdowns accelerate the trend towards online shopping and home deliveries. Freight volume is above pre-COVID-19 levels, driven by stepped-up demand for food and household items during lockdowns. 2020 saw a growth in annual retail turnover of \$15.7 billion for food and \$9.5 billion for household goods.

There has been a boom in parcel delivery as part of the shift to online shopping, reflected in Australia Post's record \$8.3 billion revenue. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows total online sales averaged an annual rise of 65 percent from March 2020 to January 2021.

Rather than taking on more full-time workers, transport companies are meeting this increased demand by outsourcing jobs to companies which pay contractors less than their full-time staff, creating a two-tier workforce and eroding permanent jobs.

Insecure work is increasing in virtually every industry, leading to workers having to work multiple jobs. ABS figures show the number of Australians with at least two jobs has grown to 32.6 percent.

The rise of insecure work at the major transport companies has been facilitated by the TWU, which has enforced successive enterprise agreements permitting the use of casual, contract and outsourced labour. The union has suppressed any opposition to this destruction of pay and conditions, ensuring it could be carried out unchallenged by any mass industrial action over the last decade.

The TWU is promoting illusions in the official parliamentary system through its call for the reintroduction of an "independent road safety tribunal," a toothless mechanism originally established by the Gillard Labor government in 2012 and abolished in 2016 by the Turnbull Liberal-National administration.

The tribunal was supposedly in place to investigate safety and regulate payment arrangements to reduce financial pressure incentives on drivers, however, when the tribunal recommended a small increase in drivers' wages it was swiftly dismantled.

The TWU seeks to have this tribunal reinstated as a means to dictate pay and conditions bureaucratically, bypassing industrial action under conditions of mounting anger throughout the trucking industry and the working class more broadly.

The TWU's current show of phoney militancy is not just a reaction to growing discontent among drivers, but an attempt to stem a continuous decline in union membership. ABS figures show that union membership among transport, postal and warehousing workers has dropped from 51.9 percent in 1994 to 19.9 percent in 2020.

Transport workers must reject the TWU's cynical claims to be fighting for job security. The dangerous and insecure conditions currently facing workers are the direct result of successive union-management EAs allowing for increased use of casual and contract labour and the destruction of permanent full-time jobs.

Under Australia's draconian "Fair Work" laws, introduced by the Labor Party and enforced by the unions, most of these workers are not allowed to take part in protected industrial action, and serve as a ready source of labour to mitigate the impact of strikes by permanent workers.

A serious struggle for improved health, safety, pay and conditions in the transport industry requires a conscious break with the TWU and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees. Through a network of these committees, workers can connect with their brothers and sisters across company lines and national borders, throughout the transport sector and the working class more broadly, and take up the necessary fight, not just against management but against Australia's draconian industrial laws and the capitalist profit system.



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