# Australia: Sydney bus drivers strike over pay and conditions

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Hundreds of bus drivers began a 24-hour strike today in Sydney's inner-west Region 6, while those working in Region 3 (southwest) will stop work tomorrow. In total, up to 1,200 workers will be involved in the industrial action.

Last week, the drivers held two-hour stoppages on Thursday morning and Friday afternoon, after a three-day ban on collecting fares.

Previously, on November 22, drivers refused to switch on their Opal card readers, the contactless fare collection system used across the New South Wales (NSW) public transport system. Their employer, Transit Systems, responded by threatening to dock workers' pay by 31.5 percent for the shifts in which they did not accept payments.

The strikes are significant in a sector where the trade unions, along with the anti-worker NSW Industrial Relations Commission, have largely maintained tight controls on industrial action against both the state Liberal-National government and the private company employers.

Most recently, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) confined a rail strike to a partial one-day stoppage in October.

A September snap bus strike over safety concerns, called when a driver at the Region 3 Smithfield depot contracted COVID-19, was shut down within 24 hours by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) after Transit Systems agreed to implement rapid antigen testing in the facility. The union made no attempt to broaden the strike beyond Smithfield and did not demand that testing be implemented at the other five depots operated by the company.

In August last year, the RTBU called off a planned strike of drivers in three Sydney regions against overcrowded buses and the absence of a requirement for passengers to wear masks.

The fact that the two unions now feel compelled to carry out the two 24-hour strikes is a reflection of mounting anger toward the deepening assault on jobs and conditions as the city's bus service approaches full privatisation.

The current dispute is part of negotiations over a new enterprise agreement (EA) with Transit Systems, in which workers are demanding an end to the two-tier employment system in Region 6 and improvements to Region 3 pay and conditions to align them with public sector drivers.

The RTBU and TWU are seeking a meagre 2.5 percent wage increase, less than the current consumer price index (CPI) of 3 percent, and far short of the rapidly increasing cost of living in Sydney, where housing prices have increased by more than 25 percent in the past year, according to CoreLogic.

Under the unions' "Same Job, Same Pay" campaign, most Region 6 workers will see no improvement to their current conditions and are striking merely to maintain the status quo, and with what, in real terms, amounts to a pay cut.

Sydney's bus network is divided into 14 regions, in which services are contracted out to 10 different companies, which offer varying pay and conditions. Region 6 was operated by the government-owned State Transit until it was privatised in July 2018. Region 6 drivers who were previously employed by State Transit initially retained the pay and conditions set down under a state-wide industrial award, while new hires were covered by an enterprise agreement (EA) with Transit Systems, also in effect in Region 3.

Compounding the divisive effect of the two-tier system in Region 6, the award workers are represented by the RTBU, while the newer recruits are covered by

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the TWU. The TWU has exclusive coverage rights in Region 3.

Under the TWU's EA, workers can be rostered for split shifts spanning up to 13 hours, with no restriction on shift portion lengths other than a requirement for a 71-minute unpaid break, and straight shifts of up to 11.5 hours (including meal breaks). As a result, drivers are scheduled to operate right up to legal fatigue limits, raising safety concerns and possible legal liability for workers if they are involved in an accident in the final minutes of a shift which may have run late.

By comparison, under the award, split shifts can span slightly less, 12 hours, with a maximum shift portion of five hours. Straight shifts are limited to 9 duty hours (exclusive of a 40-50 minute meal break).

Casual workers under the EA can be engaged for shifts as short as one hour on weekdays, rather than the three-hour minimum specified in the award.

The TWU's NSW secretary, Richard Olsen, told Channel 7 last week: "You cannot have two bus drivers in the same yard, driving the same bus on the same route, under different rates of pay and conditions. That's unacceptable."

In fact, that is precisely the situation both unions have enforced in Region 6 since it was privatised in 2018. The RTBU's primary concern with the privatisation of Region 6 and subsequent regions has been to protect its coverage rights, while the TWU has viewed the destruction of the state-run bus service as an opportunity for a membership drive.

While the two unions have ostensibly been engaged in a bitter turf war, in reality this division has allowed them to more effectively play their role as the industrial police force of management and the state government, keeping workers isolated and preventing an industry-wide mobilisation against the attacks on working conditions.

While the RTBU postures as an opponent of privatisation, it has actively collaborated in the decimation of the NSW public transport sector over the last decade.

When the privatisation of Region 6 was announced in 2017, the union called a solitary one-day strike in which Chris Preston, head of the RTBU bus division at the time, complained only that the union had not been consulted. Preston appealed to then Premier Gladys Berejiklian to "step in," because "she really knew how to talk to the union." Actually, as transport minister, Berejiklian had spearheaded the privatisation of the city's ferry services in 2012.

The union also "cautiously welcomed" the contracting out of light rail, ferries and buses in Newcastle to Keolis Downer in December 2016.

The consequences of this relentless privatisation and cost-cutting drive in the public transport sector are on stark display in Sydney. Light-rail services in the inner west have been suspended for 18 months after cracks were found in the wheel arches of the network's fleet.

Like the unions, the Labor party has publicly postured as a critic of the privatisation of Sydney's buses. NSW Labor leader Chris Minns, then shadow transport minister, claimed in 2019 that bus services were being sold off due to the state Liberal-National government's "ideological obsession."

In reality, the wave of bus privatisation was set off by the Unsworth review, commissioned by the Carr Labor state government in 2004, which called for an expansion of services run by private contractors. This formed part of a campaign of privatisation carried out by NSW Labor governments between 1996 and 2011, including the state's electricity network and freight train operations.

Labor and the unions bear chief responsibility for the transfer of public assets and services into the hands of corporations, pioneered by the federal Labor government's privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank and Qantas during the 1990s. The fight against the destruction of jobs, conditions and public amenity cannot be waged within the confines of these bankrupt organs of the financial elite.

Instead, workers must build their own organisations, rank-and-file committees, to defend workers' health, safety and jobs. That means initiating a struggle for genuine socialism, under which public transport, along with other vital services, major corporations and banks, would be placed under democratic workers' control, and operated to serve the needs of the public rather than to line the pockets of the wealthy.

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