

Australia: New South Wales bus drivers strike for 24 hours

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Around 2,000 public bus drivers held a 24-hour strike yesterday in Sydney, Newcastle, Queanbeyan and the New South Wales (NSW) Central Coast. While the strike demonstrated substantial anger among workers, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) isolated the action to a subset of drivers and suppressed discussion of the way forward.

The drivers were striking over unsafe working conditions, including being forced to drive for more than five hours without a break, lack of meal and bathroom facilities, driver shortages and pressure to meet impossible timetables.

The workers are also seeking an end to unequal pay and conditions for drivers employed by different private operators, which run the transit service under contract to the state government.

The fact is, the TWU and RTBU are responsible for this situation, both through their collaboration in the privatisation and break up of the NSW bus service and through the enforcement of successive enterprise agreements attacking workers' conditions.

The disparity is demonstrated most sharply in inner-west Sydney's Region 6, where the unions enforce a two-tiered wage system which sees pay and conditions differ among two sets of workers doing precisely the same job, on the same routes.

Public buses in NSW are operated under government contract by eleven different companies. However, only drivers employed by three companies, Transit Systems, Transdev and ComfortDelGro, were allowed to take part in yesterday's strike. The excluded drivers include those in the three Sydney contract regions privatised in the past six months.

In addition, the timing of the strike, during school holidays, was clearly chosen by the unions to ensure minimal disruption.

In Sydney, several hundred workers gathered in Martin

Place, opposite state parliament, underscoring the orientation of the rally as an appeal to NSW Transport Minister David Elliott to intervene in enterprise agreement negotiations currently underway between the unions and the three companies.

The venomous hostility of Elliott and the Liberal-National state government to public transport workers was made clear in the February 21 shutdown of Sydney's rail network. While the cancellation was entirely manufactured by the government, entirely out of proportion to limited industrial action planned by the RTBU, Elliott accused rail workers of "terrorist-like activity."

No concrete demands were advanced at the rally, which centred on the vague slogan, "same job, same pay." In fact, "same job, same pay" is precisely what Transit Systems is trying to achieve in Region 6, by forcing upper-tier workers on to the reduced pay and conditions enforced by the TWU for the second-tier Region 6 workers and all workers in Region 3.

The "same job, same pay" slogan is explicitly designed to turn workers against each other, promoting the false conception that some drivers enjoy a privileged position while others struggle.

The fact is, all bus drivers face a deepening attack on pay and conditions as well as rapid increases in the cost of living. Despite this, the unions issued no demand for a genuine pay rise for all bus drivers across the state.

Also entirely absent from the official discussion is the question of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While drivers at the Sydney rally told Socialist Equality Party campaigners they, along with many of their colleagues, had contracted the virus, the union speakers were silent.

The unions cannot speak about COVID-19, because they have played a critical role in keeping public transport workers on the job, risking their health and lives, throughout the pandemic.

In September last year, the TWU rapidly shut down a snap walkout by workers at the Region 3 Smithfield depot after a driver tested positive for COVID-19. Despite calls from drivers for regular testing of all public transport workers, the union declared the strike over after extracting a promise from Transit Systems to establish rapid antigen testing only at the Smithfield depot.

During last year's Delta outbreak, the TWU and RTBU ensured transport workers were exempted from partial lockdown measures, forcing them back to work amid high infection rates.

NSW Labor Party member of parliament Jo Haylen was prominently featured at yesterday's rally in an attempt to promote illusions in Labor as an alternative for workers, with a federal election next month and NSW set to vote in March 2023.

Haylen refused to outline any alternative policy, saying "I'm not going to negotiate from opposition." She did not commit Labor to addressing a single issue raised by bus drivers if the party is elected next year. Instead Haylen merely called for the government to "sit down with bus drivers and work it out."

Haylen claimed the situation confronting NSW bus drivers was the result of the Liberal-National government's "obsession with privatisation." In reality, it is the product of a pro-business program, aimed at subordinating social needs to the profit interests of big business, which is fully embraced by Labor.

Sydney's public bus network is now completely privatised, with the last contract area, Region 9, placed in private hands on April 3. The process began with the 2004 Unsworth review, ordered by then Labor Premier Bob Carr, whose government also presided over the sell-off of NSW's rail freight services and the destruction of train maintenance workshops and track repair divisions.

Further sell-offs of critical public infrastructure, including the NSW electricity network, have been carried out by subsequent Labor governments. The privatisation of hospitals, utilities, and transport under the current Liberal-National government is merely a continuation of this process, carried out by both major parties, and endorsed by the unions.

Workers must reject the unions' dead-end claims that electing a Labor government will resolve anything. While NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has sought to say as little as possible in response to growing working-class unrest, federal leader Anthony Albanese has clearly spelled out the party's pro-business agenda.

Albanese's election pitch is not to workers but to the

corporate elite. He is promising to implement massive restructuring and productivity increases, meaning increased attacks on working-class jobs, pay and conditions.

No gains for workers can be achieved through the election of Labor, appeals to the current Liberal-National government, or within the framework of the unions, which serve as an industrial police force of big business and capitalist governments.

The strike took place under conditions where growing sections of the working class are entering into struggle. In recent weeks, other NSW public sector workers including rail workers, nurses, paramedics and health workers have all engaged in strikes or industrial action. In Victoria, around 600 ComfortDelGro bus drivers began strike action on April 1, with drivers at three other companies expected to follow.

It is to these layers, as well as to the broader working class, that NSW bus drivers must appeal. This requires a break with the unions, which do everything in their power to isolate and divide workers.

Instead, workers must form new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the trade unions. Through a network of these committees bus drivers can reach out to their class brothers and sisters throughout the transport industry, the public sector and more broadly, to take up a fight against the relentless assault on working-class pay and conditions.

This poses the need for a socialist perspective and a fight for workers' governments, under which vital public services, including transport and health, along with major corporations and the banks, would be placed under democratic workers' control and operated to serve the needs of the public, rather than the profit demands of the wealthy elite.



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