Socialist Equality Party (Australia) election candidate speaks with striking bus drivers in Melbourne

Our reporters
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Around 1,500 bus drivers working for Dyson and Ventura went on strike for 24 hours in Melbourne yesterday, closing up to 80 bus routes. The industrial action was taken over a new industrial agreement, with wages, rosters and other working conditions the central issues.

One of the Socialist Equality Party's federal election candidates for the Senate in Victoria, Peter Byrne, attended a picket at the Dyson depot in the northern working-class suburb of Bundoora. Byrne and other SEP campaigners spoke with the striking workers about their struggle and the party's socialist and internationalist perspective.

About 100 drivers maintained the picket at Bundoora, preventing buses from leaving the depot. The drivers are mostly immigrant workers, with many from India. Everyone took a copy of the SEP election statement. One worker told Byrne that the drivers should vote for the SEP because of our candidates' support for the strike. Several workers said they had previously voted for Labor and Liberal but nothing changed. One said he met members of the SEP in Sydney and was looking for a political alternative.

Dyson regular service bus drivers receive an hourly base wage of just $30 to $31.50. This is only slightly higher than what they received at the beginning of the previous industrial agreement in July 2018, nearly four years ago, when it was $27.15 to $28.60.

In April, more than 95 percent of workers voted to take industrial action at several companies involved in Melbourne's privatised bus transportation system, including Ventura, Dyson, and Ivanhoe Bus Company. The workers are covered by the Transport Workers Union (TWU), and the authorised actions include overtime bans, work bans, and strikes.

Workers told SEP campaigners yesterday that they would strike every week until their demands are met.

The TWU bureaucracy has blocked a unified struggle of bus drivers across the network. Hundreds of workers with Kinetic, another company, were due to join yesterday's strike but this was called off by the TWU after it reached agreement with the company on a new industrial agreement. Kinetic is due to take over from Transdev as the largest operator of buses in Melbourne.

The full details on this agreement are yet to be released, but the union has reported a wage rise of 6.74 percent in 2022 and "CPI [consumer price index] Safety Net" increases in 2023 and 2024." TWU branch secretary Mike McNess declared that, "Kinetic has set a new and fair benchmark."

Kinetic and other bus drivers ought to view these claims with sharp scepticism and demand to see the agreement in full. The question can be raised, if the agreement with Kenetic marks a gain then why has it not been made publicly available for all bus drivers to scrutinise? Costs of living across Australia are surging, and bus drivers like other sections of the working class have had their living standards eroded in the last period. The latest figures show official inflation at 5.1 percent, with inflation on necessities running even higher. In addition, the rise in official interest rates by 0.25 percent this week will begin to flow through to mortgage payments and rents.

Like with Kenetic, the TWU's negotiations with Dyson have proceeded behind closed doors, with very little information provided on the unresolved issues. The

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union's log of claims is unavailable, and it is unclear what the bureaucracy has raised with management, beyond general calls for a wage increase and improvement to onerous roster and shift conditions. This secrecy ought to be taken as a warning, with another TWU sell out threatened.

Union officials have reported that in their negotiations with Dyson management, underway since last December, the company has been unwilling to offer any wage rise whatsoever.

The union also accuses Dyson of failing to pass on to workers wage subsidies provided by the state Labor government, equivalent to a 2.19 percent increase. Bus Association Victoria, which represents the private operators, has insisted that demands for higher wages and better rosters are "unreasonable" because the only way they "would be accepted is if the government is prepared to pay, which they aren't."

The TWU, which is affiliated to the Labor Party, is falsely promoting it in the federal election campaign as a pro-worker alternative to the Liberal-National government. The Labor Party is a ruthless representative of big business and finance capital. In Victoria, state Labor governments have, with the support of the TWU and other trade unions, extended the privatisation of bus services and other public transport over the last four decades.

This privatisation has been the principal mechanism for the cutting of public transport workers' wages and conditions, yet the TWU raises nothing on the issue in the course of developing new industrial agreements in the industry.

The Melbourne bus drivers are only the latest group of workers to strike in Australia in the recent period.

Last Thursday, tens of thousands of public school teachers in New South Wales held a one-day strike, which followed two strikes by NSW nurses in the past six months, and walkouts by aged care workers and a significant strike by Sydney rail workers. In each case these were the first such actions taken by workers in a decade and reflect a widespread determination within the working class to oppose the corporate drive to gut wages and conditions. In every struggle, however, the unions work to isolate workers and block the emergence of a unified struggle.

Peter Byrne told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "In my discussions with workers, I emphasised the need to take their fight out of the hands of the TWU bureaucracy and form independent rank-and-file committees, led by trusted workers. These committees need to develop the closest unity of workers throughout the bus and public transport sectors, and to turn out to other sections of workers confronting similar attacks, including teachers, nurses, and other public sector workers.

"Above all, what is required is the development of a political struggle against both the state and federal governments. The Socialist Equality Party extends its full solidarity with the striking Dyson and Ventura bus drivers and I look forward to ongoing discussions on the political issues raised by their fight."

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