

Australia: Three hundred bus drivers to strike in Newcastle

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17 June 2022

More than 300 bus drivers in the regional New South Wales city of Newcastle will carry out a 24-hour strike on Monday. The action follows a protest by bus drivers on Friday June 3, when workers walked off the job for four hours, after unanimously rejecting an enterprise agreement (EA) proposed by their employer, Keolis Downer, that would slash real wages.

The company offered workers a 10 percent pay “increase” over four years, far below the rate of inflation. The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has declared it would offer in-principle agreement if Keolis Downer revised the EA to provide a 7 percent pay increase over two years. Daniel Jaggers, president of the RTBU New South Wales (NSW) tram and bus division, said, “a seven percent increase over two years to help offset cost-of-living pressures is a fair ask from drivers who just want to earn a decent living wage.”

Last week, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several Newcastle bus drivers, who asked to remain anonymous to protect against retaliation from their employer or the union.

One worker said: “We don’t take going on strike lightly. It’s going to hot up in the next couple of weeks. We want to go on strike, we’ve had enough of it. They have refused to come to the table, this has been going on since November.

“It took about eight weeks to actually be able to go on strike. Next week we won’t turn on the [fare collection] machines and then the following week we will be on strike. It might be ongoing until we get what we want. They’ve offered us nothing.”

The driver said management had told workers, “If you guys want extra money, work more overtime!” He continued: “Sundays are voluntary, that just means workers have to give up another Sunday to get more pay to keep up with inflation.”

Another driver said: “Nothing came of the June 3 strike. The union came with a 7 percent deal to management. That is only 3.5 percent [per annum], that doesn’t even come close to the rate of inflation.”

As the worker indicated, the union’s meagre demand

would mean a significant real wage cut for workers. The official inflation rate at the end of March was already at 5.1 percent, and is widely tipped to reach 7 percent before the end of the year. The price of basic everyday goods and services, including petrol, utilities and food is increasing even more rapidly.

Limited industrial action is scheduled after the single-day strike, starting with a ban on fare collection from Tuesday. However, the RTBU issued a bulletin to workers on Friday, cautioning workers that Keolis Downer had raised “major concerns” about the fare collection ban. The union warned that the company may dock workers’ pay or refuse to pay them entirely if they do not turn the card readers on, or even lock out the entire workforce.

The bulletin went on to note that, while Keolis Downer was willing to consider a two-year enterprise agreement, they had refused to accept the union’s meagre wage demand. The RTBU wrote: “Given the ferries are getting 3% across each year and are nearly done with their agreement, it’s safe to say we could likely push for 3% across the board successfully.”

In other words, the union, having almost finished selling out one section of their membership, is now preparing to ram through the same rotten deal against another.

While the RTBU claimed this message was not “designed to change your mind,” its clear purpose is to convince workers that 3 percent per annum is the best they can get and to discourage them from proceeding with further industrial action.

The fact that the RTBU felt compelled to call Monday’s strike, the second in less than three weeks, speaks to the growing anger among workers to the deepening assault on jobs, working conditions, and the rapidly rising cost of living.

In recent months, tens of thousands of teachers, health workers, public sector workers, rail workers and other bus drivers have carried out major strikes. The RTBU, along with all the other unions, the government and the ruling elite, is desperate to shut down workers’ demands for a

unified struggle.

On Wednesday June 8, RTBU members declared their support for striking public sector workers. One worker wrote on the union's Facebook page: "We should have gone out at the same time as the PSA [Public Service Association]." Another asked: "Why [are] Unions NSW stopping workers from taking action? ... Why are the RTBU members not striking in unison with the PSA? We all work for the same idiots."

The union has refused to broaden the strike beyond the Newcastle bus drivers. There are over 14,000 paid members of the RTBU in NSW who have not been called on to support their Newcastle colleagues. Light rail and ferries in the region, also operated by Keolis Downer, and which are similarly covered by the RTBU, are operating as usual.

Thousands of bus drivers throughout Melbourne and Sydney have also recently taken strike action over real wage cuts, attacks on conditions and safety concerns amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In each case, the RTBU and the Transport Workers' Union (TWU) have done everything possible to reduce the impact of these strikes, restricting actions to a single day or less, and isolating disputes to a limited subset of workers, despite the common issues they confront.

This is not a mistake by the union bureaucracy but official policy. The union is playing its role as an industrial police force of management and the state government.

The unions insist that unified action is not possible because of Australia's draconian industrial relations laws. The reality is that this legislation was implemented by union-backed Labor governments and has been enforced ever since by the unions.

The cooperation of the RTBU and other unions with all governments, state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike, has also been crucial to allowing the bipartisan privatisation agenda, the chief mechanism for the slashing of public transport workers' wages and conditions, to go ahead.

While the RTBU postures as an opponent of privatisation, it has actively collaborated in the decimation of the NSW public transport sector over the past few decades. When Newcastle's buses, light rail and ferries were privatised in December 2016, the union "welcomed" the 10-year deal with Keolis Downer. Then RTBU NSW Bus Division Secretary Chris Preston declared it was "a great step forward for Newcastle transport workers, who can now finally put a face to their future employer."

In NSW, the privatisation of public transport 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.

The newly elected federal Labor government has made clear that it plans to deepen the assault on wages. Treasurer Jim Chalmers has called for workers to make "sacrifices," and insists that wage rises must be linked to increased "productivity," in other words, the slashing of hard-won conditions.

No gains for workers can be achieved through the election of Labor at state level, appeals to the current Liberal-National government, or within the framework of the corporatised trade unions.

Instead, workers must take matters into their own hands. New, independent, organisations of struggle must be formed, including rank-and-file committees. Newcastle bus drivers should appeal to the growing layers of workers entering into struggle, including other transport workers, teachers and health workers, to take up a unified struggle 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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