

Australia: Striking Newcastle bus drivers speak out on pay and conditions

Our reporters
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On Monday, around 300 bus drivers in the regional New South Wales (NSW) city of Newcastle struck for 24 hours over a proposed enterprise agreement from Keolis Downer containing a 10 percent pay “increase” over four years. This followed a four-hour strike on June 3, after workers unanimously rejected the deal.

Despite the clear determination of workers to fight, the Rail Tram and Bus Union yesterday agreed in principle to the company’s revised pay offer of 7 percent over two years, well below the official inflation rate of 5.1 percent.

Drivers should reject this paltry offer and the union’s attempt to sell out their struggle and impose two years of real pay cuts. This means workers must take matters into their own hands, through the formation of their own rank-and-file committee, independent of the union, which has allowed the privatisation of the transport system and imposed successive agreements slashing pay and conditions.

A turn should be made to other sections of workers across the state and around the country, including bus drivers who have taken recent strike action in Melbourne, and NSW rail staff, who are also in a dispute. With mass strikes next week by NSW nurses and teachers, what is posed is the need for a unified struggle of the entire working class against the offensive of big business, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking bus drivers on Monday, who discussed at length their working and social conditions, the cost-of-living crisis and the issues involved in the dispute, including the inadequacy of the 7 percent deal.

Workers’ names have been changed to protect them against retaliation from their employer or the union.

John told WSWs reporters: “What the union is asking is still far behind inflation. A 3.5 percent wage increase is not enough, and now interest rates are being put up. Whatever way you look at it, we are going backwards.

“We’re not the only ones. Nurses have been going on strike, they’re still battling. After what the nurses have gone through over the past couple of years, they are getting offered a pittance. We do an important service to the community. We take kids to school, we take people to work, a lot of people wouldn’t be able to get to work and back home if it wasn’t for us. We have a responsibility to take care of these people. It is a much more important job than what we are getting paid for.”

Jake said: “We’re just trying to make a living basically. We’re on about \$31 an hour before tax. The company is saying we have to work seven days a week if we want more money. You shouldn’t have to work six or seven days a week to keep up with the cost of living. If your day is 13 hours, and you work weekends as well, when are you able to spend time with your family? All you are doing is putting money in the bank to pay the bills. You go home, have dinner, watch a bit of TV, go to sleep, get up again the next day, same schedule.

“The wage rises we have gotten in the past supposedly kept up with inflation, but does the inflation rate really reflect the cost of living? When you look at house prices, jumping like \$300,000 in two years, it’s unbelievable how much they have gone up. Everything is going up, everything except wages.

“Everyone should be in a unified struggle, everyone should be getting a pay rise across the board. If workers stick together, they have power. That is the problem though, the government doesn’t want everyone to be out together. It’s the old tactic of divide and conquer,

divide workers up and take us on one by one.”

Ben told WSWS reporters: “It’s important to stand up and fight for what we have because once you start losing conditions you rarely get them back, conditions that were fought hard for years ago.”

Ben explained that since the bus service was privatised in 2017, new drivers no longer start as “fixed” part-time employees, with guaranteed hours, but as part-time “variable,” enabling the company to slash hours through roster reviews. He said: “When they did their last roster review, they cut 2 percent of our wages across the board. In the review they did before that they took 1.8 percent.”

Ben said workers had been told to expect further cuts to their hours. “We’ve lost 5.8 percent of wages through roster reviews in the past few years. One of their first offers was 2 percent per year for 3 years and the company has already taken 4 percent the year before through the review.”

The company used the previous review to slash shift allowances paid to workers. Ben explained: “If your shift finishes after 8 p.m., one of the conditions is you get an allowance per hour on top of your wages. It’s a 15 percent loading on your wage, which works out to an extra \$4 per hour.” The company changed the rostering so that drivers who previously started at midday “now start at 10 a.m. and finish at 6 p.m. so the company can avoid paying that allowance.”

The last roster review also targeted split-shift workers. Ben said that split-shift workers are paid double time starting 10.5 hours after they sign on. “So, what they try to do is get casuals to start in the morning, then sign off, then the same casual will start twice in the same day. The morning and afternoon travel peaks are covered but the company doesn’t have to pay the ‘spread’ anymore.”

Mark told WSWS reporters: “If you make any mistake, they can sack you. For example, with a school route, if you take a wrong turn, they can sack you for it. It’s easy to do, we have over 100 school routes and there’s no way you’re going to know them all.

“We’ve got TFNSW [Transport for New South Wales] watching us on the screen. They brought in telematics, which is a little key that you plug in which checks the performance of your driving, it makes sure you’re not speeding or going around corners too fast or braking too hard or accelerating too hard. You’ve got

six cameras watching you all the time. If you have one customer complain, you’re in trouble. They are watching you your whole shift. Let’s say you take your hand off the wheel to pick up a piece of paper to know what your next turn is, there’s a written warning.

“When we were State Transit, we had 300 drivers between both depots. We’re now up to staff number 800, that means we’ve gone through 500 drivers in the space of four years. There were times when they would put on 30 drivers and now there are only two or three of them left. Most of the attrition is new drivers, because the old guys can’t afford to leave. There are so many new drivers because they’re lying, they’ll say in the advertisement, ‘family friendly roster,’ and then you end up on split shifts working six days a week without weekends off.”

Max said: “We are feeling the brunt of being short-staffed and the impact of COVID. For example, I was a close contact with my daughter, and I had to take a week off. We have been short of drivers this whole time. They have had to cancel routes because they didn’t have enough staff.

“Most of the buses that operate now, you only have about 20 percent of passengers who come on wearing masks. Most people don’t wear masks on buses because they don’t have to wear them at shopping centres or anything like that. We don’t want to wear them either, but we have to, it’s our only protection.

“To reduce their labour cost, when the company does a review, they reduce the time in the routes until they can’t reduce it anymore. They tweak it to the point where you can’t keep up with it. If anything happens or something goes wrong, you won’t be able to do the route on time.”



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