Australia: Kinetic bus drivers should reject sell-out deal

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Bus drivers at Kinetic, the largest bus operator in Melbourne, begin voting today on a proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to reject the deal, which is not a "win," as the Transport Workers Union (TWU) claims, but a union sellout.

The union-approved deal meets none of the workers' demands for protection from inflation or improvements to rosters.

What management and the TWU are counting on is that the deal appears at first glance to offer an above-inflation pay rise. Under the EA, workers will be paid $32.95 per hour, backdated to January 31 and $34.45 per hour from July 1, for a combined nominal pay rise of 6.74 percent. Future wage increases on July 1 in 2023 and 2024 will be whichever is higher, 2 percent or the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Melbourne, which was 4.55 percent in the March quarter this year, slightly lower than the national CPI of 5.1 percent.

In truth, the deal means real wage cuts for workers for three reasons: Firstly, CPI does not reflect the true increase in the cost of living, especially of necessities such as food, housing and travel including petrol. Secondly, CPI is predicted to rise to at least 7 percent by the end of this year and the nominal pay increases will lag price rises by 3-15 months. Finally, the deal says allowances will only be increased "in accordance with the Annual Wage Review determinations by the Fair Work Commission (FWC)." The latest "increase" by the FWC was only 4.6 percent, just above the Melbourne CPI and well below the national CPI of 5.1 percent.

The deal offers slight increases in penalty rate allowances, with 15 percent loading after 8 p.m. (instead of 10 p.m. as Kinetic had initially proposed) and before 6 a.m. In reality, this does not even bring Kinetic drivers' conditions into line with the industry award, which provides the shift loading after 7 p.m.

The proposed agreement does nothing to address workers' concerns over rostering and "unreasonable shifts." Under the deal, Kinetic will still be able to include unpaid meal breaks of up to 90 minutes in shifts covering a spread of more than 9.25 hours, after the TWU dropped a demand for this to be reduced to 60 minutes.

Behind the backs of workers, Kinetic and the TWU have agreed to an additional clause in the EA that explicitly allows the company to use new technology to "manage employees performance" and take disciplinary action against workers for "any breaches of company policy."

If the TWU succeeds in ramming through this rotten deal, it will become the basis of pending EAs for bus drivers at Ventura, Dyson and CDC in Melbourne and at Kinetic in Queensland. This underscores the need for bus drivers, along with other transport workers and the broader working class, to mount a unified struggle for decent pay and conditions.

This is impossible within the framework of the unions, whose role, as an industrial police force of management, is to isolate workers and shut down their opposition to attacks on conditions.

In May, workers at Kinetic were due to join a strike by workers at Dyson and Ventura but the TWU announced it had reached a deal with the company only days before the strike. This was a repeat of events in 2018, when the TWU called off at the last minute a strike by 1,000 bus drivers at the depots now run by Kinetic, but then operated by Transdev.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to two Kinetic drivers, who asked that their names be changed to avoid retaliation from the company or the union.

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Mark told the WSWS: “I was ready to strike. Everyone was ready to strike. Drivers want a real pay rise that can cover the cost of living.”

He said that, although he is on a weekday roster, he works six days about forty weeks per year because the overtime is necessary to earn enough to support his family.

Alex, who had previously been a union delegate for two years, said “we should all have gone out on strike together.” He continued, “the unions are just Mafia,” who will “have a back room negotiation and then let us know what happened.”

Alex said the 6.74 percent pay increase was not enough: “Prices are rising faster than that. We need to get double the CPI.” He said a driver on 38 hours a week “needs to earn $1,600 each week [to cover the cost of living] but they only earn $900, so drivers at my depot are working six days a week most of the year.”

Throughout the federal election campaign, the TWU, like all the other unions, insisted the Liberal-National government was solely responsible for declining wages and promoted the Labor Party as the solution. The reality is that cuts to wages are central to the broader strategy of the ruling class and are supported by the entire political establishment.

The newly-installed Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese quickly abandoned any promises of a “better future” for the demand that workers must make “sacrifices,” and has made clear that it opposes across-the-board pay rises in line with inflation.

The increasingly impossible conditions of daily life are driving growing sections of workers into struggle. They are determined to fight; what stands in the way are the unions, which have sought to limit actions, suppress discussion among workers and strangle calls for a unified struggle.

On June 20, 300 bus drivers went on strike in Newcastle. By Thursday, the Rail Tram and Bus Union had given in-principle agreement to a sell-out deal offering workers a pitiful 7 percent wage increase over two years, far below the rate of inflation.

This week there will be major strikes by nurses, teachers and rail workers in NSW. The strikes will be held on separate days, denying them the opportunity for a combined struggle for their wages and conditions.

This mirrors developments overseas. Last week, 50,000 British rail workers held three one-day strikes. Hundreds of thousands more workers in the UK are determined to join the strike movement, but the unions covering them are dragging out the process of voting on actions in order to prevent a mass mobilisation.

Growing numbers of workers, in Australia and overseas, are coming face to face with the realisation that their struggle cannot be carried forward within the framework of the unions. But anger with the unions’ betrayals is not enough.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to develop democratically controlled rank-and-file committees within each workplace, independent of the unions, to begin an open discussion about the issues they face and to turn to other workers, including transport workers throughout the country and internationally.

We urge workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party so we can assist them in forming these committees and fighting to build the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Above all, the onslaught on transport staff underscores the need for a new, socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of every aspect of society, including essential transit, to the profit interests of big business. Such a perspective would include the fight for transport to be transformed into a public utility, democratically-controlled by the working class, as part of a broader reorganisation of society to meet social need.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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