

Australia's Gold Coast bus drivers strike over poor wages and conditions

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Bus drivers working for Kinetic, a global transport conglomerate, in Australia's Gold Coast walked off the job for six hours yesterday and rallied on the city's main highway, fighting against low wages and poor working conditions.

Strikers won support from passing motorists opposite the large Australia Fair shopping mall, waving placards and chanting slogans for "fair pay." About 100 workers and supporters joined the rally, held just a few days before Christmas and after Kinetic's school bus services had shut down for the year.

It was the first time in eleven years that the Transport Workers Union (TWU) was forced to call a strike at Surfside buses, a Kinetic operation. The mounting anger of workers over the soaring cost of living, lack of job safety and non-existent toilet and lunch facilities produced a more than 95 percent vote for industrial action.

In October, workers voted by more than 90 percent to reject a derisory enterprise agreement "offer" from the company, which included a first year pay rise of just 4.5 percent to \$28.99 an hour, far below the official inflation rate, which is predicted to be 8 percent by the end of this month.

These workers, together with Kinetic employees across the world, are in a battle against a ruthless corporation under conditions of the greatest international cost-of-living and economic crisis since World War II. Kinetic boasts of being the largest bus operator in Australia and New Zealand with almost 5,000 buses in its fleet, providing government-subsidised services in many locations.

It holds over 90 lucrative contracts with state governments in Australia, including Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and New South Wales, and with the New Zealand government and city councils.

Kinetic typifies the domination of all basic industries and services by giant investment houses under capitalism. According to its website, the company has two major shareholders, the Canadian superannuation funded OPTrust and funds managed by Infrastructure Capital Group. Local

management holds a minor shareholding.

Kinetic became a "global, multi-modal owner and operator" in October by acquiring joint control over the UK-based Go-Ahead group. This group, Kinetic's website states, has a fleet of more than 6,000 buses across the UK, Ireland, Sweden and Singapore. It is responsible for a quarter of London's buses for Transport for London and operates rail services in the UK, Norway and Germany.

Go-Ahead is now controlled by Gerard Investment Bidco, a newly formed company indirectly owned by Kinetic and Spanish transport infrastructure firm Globalvia Inversiones SAU. Altogether, Kinetic and Go-Ahead now employ, and exploit, more than 34,000 transport workers on three continents.

In October, the TWU told workers it is demanding a pay rise to \$35 an hour from the first year of a three-year enterprise agreement. It is seeking a deal with Kinetic via ongoing backroom negotiations, which are due to resume on January 3. The last such agreement the TWU bureaucrats had with the company expired in September.

TWU official, James Wilkinson, told the workers yesterday that the company was "moving" and had agreed to two "really good clauses." He said these related to consultation with the union on proposed work changes and a dispute resolution process. Both are means of enabling the union to work with the management to contain workers' opposition to ongoing attacks by Kinetic on their conditions.

Aware of discontent with the union's role, Wilkinson said workers had asked why the TWU had not called a 24-hour strike. He claimed that it was better to gradually escalate the dispute.

In reality, these manoeuvres are a warning of another union sellout. Several months ago, the TWU leaders negotiated a series of new agreements covering drivers at Kinetic and three other major bus operators in Melbourne that further cut real wages. The deals made at Kinetic, ComfortDelGro (CDC), Ventura and Dyson's were similar to other sub-inflationary wage "increases" rammed through by the TWU and other union bureaucrats across the transport

industry and more broadly since the Albanese Labor government took office in May.

Despite brewing unrest among workers and the breakout of strikes by nurses, teachers, aged care workers and others, the union apparatuses are enforcing the demands of the corporate elite and the state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, that workers must make “sacrifices” and that any growth in wages must be paid for in the form of “increased productivity”—that is, speed up.

At yesterday’s rally, several striking workers spoke to the WSWs anonymously to avoid management victimisation. One, a driver for 30 years, said the strike was about bringing workers up to a living wage. “Everything has become very expensive and there is no consideration for workers,” he said.

“It’s all for corporate profit. I said to my wife a few years ago that it’s going to take a general strike for everyone to survive.”

A longtime driver said that when he started at Surfside buses 17 years ago, the pay was \$17 an hour. Now it was just \$27, nowhere near the rise in living costs over that time. He said Kinetic received good money from the Queensland state government’s Translink to operate the buses but did not even provide safety screens for drivers.

Another striker said that if the next bargaining session with Kinetic on January 3 did not result in real pay rises, there would be bigger strike action.

Dissatisfaction over many years with the TWU, whose members total about a third of the 600 workers at Surfside, has led to the formation of an alternative bargaining group covering the non-union drivers at Surfside. However, the non-union group works alongside the TWU and is involved in the bargaining sessions with Kinetic. It has been registered as a legal bargaining entity with the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

The FWC is a pro-business industrial court that presides over the enterprise bargaining legislation. These laws, first imposed by the Keating Labor government and the trade unions in 1991, ban all industrial action, except at individual workplaces during union-controlled bargaining periods every three years or so.

The Albanese government’s recent industrial relations bill, which Labor and the unions have fraudulently claimed will lift wages, strengthens the powers of the FWC to block or halt industrial action, backed by the threat of punitive fines. That is because of concerns in the ruling class that the unions are losing their capacity to suppress workers’ struggles, with their membership imploding because of their pro-business record.

At Kinetic and everywhere else, the struggle against the government-employer attacks on conditions and cuts to take-

home pay cannot go forward through the unions and the straitjacket of the anti-strike laws, which the unions helped draw up and have policed for more than three decades.

To prevent another TWU betrayal, workers at Surfside and all Kinetic operations, and throughout every other industry, need to establish genuine democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union apparatuses. These committees would determine and issue demands in the interests of workers, not the financial elite, and reach out to other workers, including bus drivers, throughout the country and internationally.

In the UK, this fight is being led by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee (LBRFC), supported by the Socialist Equality Party. The LBRFC serves to bring together bus drivers from all companies, as well as rail and other transport workers, in a common struggle against the assault on their wages and conditions and the ongoing sellouts by the unions.

We urge Kinetic workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party in Australia so we can assist them in forming these committees and fighting to build the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees as the means to coordinate and lead workers’ struggles worldwide.

The appalling pay and conditions of bus drivers and other transport workers at the hands of conglomerates like Kinetic and its financial masters cannot be answered without the building of a global working-class movement against the capitalist profit system itself.

That underscores the need for a new, socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of every aspect of society, including essential public transport, to the profit interests of big business. Such a perspective would include the transformation of transport 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:

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