

Australian Gold Coast and Tweed Coast bus workers strike again over pay and conditions

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Bus drivers, cleaners and refuellers employed by Kinetic, a global transport giant, took strike action yesterday for 24 hours on Queensland's Gold Coast and across the border on the adjacent New South Wales Tweed Coast. It was their second stoppage in a month. They are demanding much higher wages, basic safety measures and better working conditions.

About 80 striking workers and supporters rallied on the Gold Coast Highway, opposite the Australia Fair shopping mall, waving placards and flags and winning support from passing motorists. The strike stopped most bus routes and many school bus runs throughout both adjoining regions.

The stand being taken by these workers is part of a wider working-class struggle internationally, driven by the worldwide cost-of-living crisis. The strikers are pitted against Kinetic—an expanding profit-gouging transnational corporation that now boasts of employing, with its partner, Go-Ahead, more than 34,000 transport workers on three continents, from the UK to Singapore and New Zealand.

Around the world, Kinetic is profiteering from the privatisation of bus services. It has picked up lucrative contracts with governments to run public transport services. It receives millions of dollars a week from Queensland's state Labor government and the New South Wales Liberal-National government, while treating workers with contempt.

Yesterday's strike was just the second time in 11 years that the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which covers about half the 600 workers, was forced to call a stoppage at Surfside Buslines, which Kinetic took over in 2019. After years of low wages, ever-tightening schedules that leave no time for turnaround breaks, and a lack of essential safety, lunch and toilet facilities, workers voted last year by more than 95 percent for industrial action.

After a six-hour strike on December 19, Kinetic

management only marginally lifted its pay offer to 8.2 percent for the first year of a two-year enterprise agreement and 4 percent for the second year. That would leave the bus workers falling even further behind the soaring cost of living, on base wages of less than \$30 an hour for the next year, and slightly more the year after.

Prices for essentials that working-class households need to live, such as food, petrol and housing costs, rose by more than 10 percent in 2022, and inflation is still accelerating, not peaking, according to the latest Consumer Price Index statistics. The official headline inflation rate was 7.8 percent but the prices of “non-discretionary” items rose much faster.

In October, when workers voted overwhelmingly to reject a derisory “offer” from Kinetic, the TWU told workers it would demand a pay rise to \$35 an hour from the first year of a three-year deal with the company. Yesterday, however, TWU officials said the \$35 goal had been put back to 2025. That would mean more than two more years, at least, of fast falling real wages.

As he did at the last strike rally on December 19, TWU official James Wilkinson claimed the union had achieved “big wins” in negotiations with the management. However, these related to consultation with the union on management “change proposals” and a dispute resolution clause.

These “wins” amount to a desperate bid by the TWU to gain a grip over the discontent among Kinetic workers. The TWU and other trade union bureaucrats use such provisions to cement their role as an industrial police force, working with management to contain workers' opposition to the ongoing attack on their living and working conditions.

Wilkinson said the talks were “tracking quite nicely at the moment.” That is a warning of a looming bid to impose a sellout. TWU organiser Jared Abbot gave another indication of that later when he told the media

that the union was “willing to work with” the company’s first-year nominal pay offer.

Kinetic last week threatened to go to the Fair Work Commission, the federal government’s industrial tribunal, for an order to suspend the stoppage, but then agreed to further talks with the TWU and a non-TWU bargaining group to seek a deal. Those talks are due to resume tomorrow, with the TWU clearly signalling its readiness to back another sub-inflationary agreement.

Striking workers who spoke to the WSWs yesterday gave a picture of the intolerable conditions they face. One female driver said: “If you don’t work overtime and on weekends, you can’t live. I calculated that my after-tax pay for a flat week would be about \$850. But my rent for a two-bedroom duplex has just gone up from \$400 to \$500 a week, and that is happening all over the Gold Coast.”

One of her co-workers said: “The schedules give us three-minute turnaround times. That is not enough to even go to the toilet. And many of the public or shopping centre toilets are shut at night.” She added: “I used to earn more working in retail. And we are responsible for many people’s lives on our buses, especially on school runs.”

A driver commented: “Kinetic is making big profits out of us. Our wages are stagnating, not keeping up. The poor people are suffering. This is happening around the world. Kinetic is robbing money from the governments and screwing everyone else.”

A group of workers had similar thoughts. They said they had to work six days a week, including weekends, just to live. “The company treats us like robots,” one said. “Kinetic keeps shortening the route times.” Another explained: “What we want is a pay rise and safety. The schedules are too tight. We drive five hours without a break.” A driver added: “You never see this in the media. It is on the side of the companies and the governments.”

Another driver said the Gold Coast was a contrast between the rich and the poor, with many passengers trying to avoid paying fares or angry or exhibiting drug problems. “If we get through a day without an accident or incident, we are lucky. The traffic is horrendous as well.”

Other drivers spoke about the lack of training provided by Kinetic, despite governments paying the company to train drivers, who had to operate buses with sometimes up to 90 passengers onboard, particularly during school terms.

One driver said most of the buses had no safety barriers to protect drivers, despite such barriers being standard on Queensland government buses. “The government does

need to protect drivers,” he insisted.

Last year, the TWU leaders negotiated a series of wage-cutting agreements covering drivers at Kinetic and three other major bus operators in Melbourne. The deals made at Kinetic, ComfortDelGro (CDC), Ventura and Dyson’s were similar to the sub-inflationary wage “increases” pushed through by the TWU and other union bureaucrats across the transport industry and more broadly since the Albanese Labor government took office last May.

Dissatisfaction over many years with the TWU has led to the formation of an “independent bargaining group” at Surfside. However, the group works alongside the TWU and is involved in the bargaining sessions with Kinetic.

To prevent another TWU betrayal, workers need to establish genuine democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus. These committees would determine and fight for demands in the interests of workers, not the financial elite, and reach out to other workers, including bus drivers, throughout the country and internationally.

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.

That is bound up with the fight for a socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of every aspect of society, including public transport, to the profit interests of big business.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)