

Australian Gold Coast and Tweed Coast bus workers to strike against company ballot “offer”

Mike Head
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In what has become an important dispute for bus and other workers nationally and internationally, the more than 650 drivers and other workers employed by the global conglomerate Kinetic on Australia’s Gold Coast and adjoining Tweed Coast will strike for 24 hours again next Monday, February 13.

This Friday, they will also impose a fare-free day by turning off their “cubics,” which record fares and monitor their bus movements.

There is seething anger among the workers over the company’s decision to hold a ballot this week on its latest enterprise bargaining agreement “offer.” Kinetic’s proposal seeks to impose another two years of cuts to real pay compared to inflation, and maintain poor conditions—from inadequate or non-existent toilet and meal facilities to lack of safety and badly-maintained buses.

The stand being taken by the Kinetic workers—this will be their third strike in six weeks—should be actively supported by workers everywhere. They are confronting a transnational corporation that boasts of employing, with its partner, Go-Ahead, more than 34,000 transport workers across Australia and on three continents, from the UK to Singapore and New Zealand.

The Gold Coast is promoted as a tourism destination but it is Australia’s sixth largest city, with a population of more than 600,000, just to the south of Brisbane, the Queensland state capital. Under a lucrative contract from the state Labor government, Kinetic’s Surfside Buslines operates the city’s main public transport, as well as the school bus services.

In the adjacent Tweed Shire, with another 100,000 people, Kinetic likewise has a profitable contract from the New South Wales state Liberal-National government, providing privatised public transport services.

Workers told the WSWs they expected a strong “no” vote on the ballot, following the more than 90 percent vote last October to reject Kinetic’s initial deal. One driver said: “Workers are not happy with it.” At one depot, a worker

wrote “Vote No” in red over the company’s notices of a vote on its “Updated Financial Offer.”

Despite two strikes, the company is now proposing only slightly more than last year—a \$30 hourly flat rate for drivers and \$23 for cleaners/refuellers for the first year of a two-year agreement.

That “rise” of 8.2 percent would be followed by a second-year increase of only 4 percent for drivers, leaving them much further behind the soaring cost of living, which is currently surging at more than 10 percent for essentials such as food, petrol, electricity, rents and mortgages, and visits to doctors.

According to the company’s misleading propaganda, the second-year pay increase for drivers could exceed 4 percent, if the Wage Price Index (WPI) is higher, but that index currently stands at only 3.2 percent. For cleaners/refuellers, the second-year rise will be even lower—either the minimum wage amount determined by the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the pro-business federal industrial tribunal, or the WPI.

“We can’t make ends meet,” one driver commented, citing a doubling of his electricity bill and soaring food, medical and car insurance costs.

In notices posted at depots and misinformation sent out to the public, Kinetic cynically claims that its “offer” shows its “commitment to providing better pay and conditions.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Besides below-inflation pay increases, Kinetic’s enterprise agreement document contains a host of onerous clauses. Clause 9.4 (e), for example, states: “If you are not rostered to work a Public Holiday and you do not work, you will not receive any additional payments.” That perpetuates the company’s ability to manipulate rosters to strip drivers of public holiday allowances.

By clause 6.3, “Rosters can be changed with as little as 24 hours’ notice.” Clause 7.1 provides for unpaid meal breaks of 30 to 60 minutes, only if a shift is longer than five hours.

Clause 41.1 stipulates that the company can suspend workers for up to four weeks for allegedly damaging its reputation. That would cover any public complaint about Kinetic's working conditions or the poor state of its buses.

Under "consultation," clause 34 would permit Kinetic to further speed up schedules or make other "major changes" that affect workers. The company only has to "consider" any matters raised by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) or other bargaining representatives "in the course of the discussion."

Clause 42 effectively bars any independent action by workers against company attacks. It requires workers to submit any disputes first to management and then to mediation and arbitration by the FWC.

These and other clauses are designed to cement a partnership with the TWU. Clause 3 commits the "parties"—that is the TWU and other bargaining representatives—to seek to "achieve an efficient and mutually beneficial relationship."

Clause 35 commits the "parties" to ongoing "Continuous Improvement Meetings" to "promote a co-operative approach to the achievement of the business objectives of Surfside." Clause 45 says "Surfside and the Union will continue to work together and engage constructively, to develop industry initiatives."

The TWU and other trade union bureaucrats use such processes to reinforce their role in working with management to contain and stifle workers' opposition to the ongoing attacks on their conditions.

Despite the poor pay and working conditions, the two strikes held in December and January marked the first time in 11 years that the TWU, which covers about half the workers, has called a stoppage at Surfside Buslines, which Kinetic took over in 2019.

In October, when workers voted overwhelmingly to reject Kinetic's first "offer," 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. However, the TWU officials have since declared that the \$35 goal has been put back to 2025. That would mean over two more years, at least, of falling real wages.

Last year, the TWU leaders negotiated real 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 provided pay rises above those being proposed by Kinetic at Surfside. But they were similar to 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 such betrayals by the

TWU and other unions has led to the formation of an "independent bargaining" group at Surfside. One driver summed up the sentiment of many. "I have no confidence in the unions," she said. "Today, they are absolutely rubbish." Another said workers were asking: "What has the union done for me?"

The bargaining group appears to be the first in Australia to obtain registered status from the FWC. That means it has been recognised as a "party" in the negotiating sessions with Kinetic. As such, while insisting it is independent, it works alongside the TWU, and within the straitjacket of the anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws first introduced by the Keating Labor government in the 1990s.

Voting "no" in Kinetic's ballot is only a first step in preventing another sellout by the TWU. Workers need to establish genuine democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, independent of the union officials.

These committees would determine and issue demands in the interests of workers, not the bus companies and the rest of the corporate ruling elite, and reach out to other workers, throughout the country and internationally, for support.

That includes bus drivers in London, where workers at Abellio, another transport corporation, are in the third month of strikes demanding £20 an hour for all drivers and an end to punishing work schedules.

We urge all workers, including the SkyBus and other Kinetic workers in Melbourne and elsewhere, and the bus drivers in Brisbane and other cities, to send messages and offers of support to the Surfside workers.

We urge Kinetic and other workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party so we can assist them in forming rank-and-file committees and building the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees as the means to coordinate and lead workers' struggles worldwide against the deepening attacks of big business and its governments.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact