

Australian transport union anti-democratically “postpones” Gold-Tweed Coast bus strike

Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
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On Wednesday, totally behind the backs of bus workers, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) moved to call off a 24-hour stoppage next Monday by more than 650 drivers and cleaners/refuellers employed by the global bus conglomerate Kinetic on Australia’s Gold and Tweed Coasts.

The deal struck by the TWU officials with Kinetic, supposedly to postpone the strike until next Friday, is a warning that the union, which covers about half the workers, is preparing another sellout, like it has imposed on transport workers across the country for years.

By agreeing with Kinetic’s Surfside Buslines to prevent Monday’s stoppage, the TWU has paved the way for management to proceed unhindered with a ballot next week on its latest derisory enterprise bargaining agreement “offer.”

Kinetic’s proposal seeks to impose another two years of cuts to real pay compared to inflation, and to allow management to keep speeding up schedules. It will also maintain poor conditions—from inadequate or non-existent toilet and meal facilities to lack of safety and badly-maintained buses.

While the TWU is formally supporting a “no” vote—aware of the anger among the Surfside workers—its rotten deal with Kinetic to delay the strike displays the anxiety of the union bureaucrats to scuttle this major dispute as soon as possible, and prevent it from winning wider support from workers.

One bus driver gave voice to the fury among her co-workers. She told the WSWS: “Well I suppose you know by now, there’s no strike next week. Just another ‘no’ vote coming up next week.

“We’ve been sold out by the union, sold out by Kinetic. We gave our support. I asked one of the guys in Ops today how many strikes has there been since he’s been here, not including last week’s strike and he said ‘one.’ Well that just shows the union has never done a thing. They will lose more members because I sure will never sign up now.”

On Wednesday, without consulting the Surfside workers, the TWU entered a hearing in Brisbane of the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal Labor government’s pro-business industrial tribunal.

Kinetic applied to the FWC for an order to suspend Monday’s stoppage, utilising the anti-strike Fair Work Act, which the Albanese Labor government amended in December, above all to strengthen the powers of the FWC to block industrial action by workers.

In response to Kinetic’s application, the TWU gave an “undertaking” to the company and the FWC commissioner the terms of which have not been divulged to workers. According to a notice from the FWC, the TWU agreed to withdraw its “Protected Industrial Action” notification, and said it would lodge a new notification for unspecified industrial action next Friday, February 17.

Late on Wednesday, Kinetic then wrote to the “independent bargaining representative”—a group covering workers dissatisfied with the TWU—asking for an undertaking from the group to also withdraw its “Protected Industrial Action” notification, and not to notify any stoppage to commence before February 17.

Kinetic gave the group a deadline of midday on Thursday—the next day—to agree. That was despite the group not even being informed of the FWC hearing. This intimidating deadline gave the group no time to consult its members.

In the meantime, on Wednesday evening, long before the deadline given to the “independent” group expired, the TWU sent emails to its Surfside members informing them that it had called off Monday’s strike, supposedly “after consultation with the TWU delegate team.”

The TWU emails tried to justify the union’s anti-democratic action by stating: “Commissioner sent a strong signal to the TWU that there was a high risk that she would make a decision to suspend strike action for up to 30 days if the TWU did not move the strike until after the voting

period.”

These events demonstrate two things. One is that under the Labor government’s Fair Work Act, the FWC, as intended, functions as an agency of the employers, and the corporate elite as whole, in shutting down any industrial action that threatens the interests of big business.

The second is that the trade unions, like the TWU, consciously use the anti-strike laws to stifle workers’ opposition, in order to push through sellout deals with the employers.

As the WSWS has explained, the stand being taken by the Kinetic workers—this was to 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 workers voted by more than 90 percent last October to reject Kinetic’s initial deal. Despite two strikes, the company is still 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.

In addition, some of the proposed pay rates and allowances in Kinetic’s enterprise agreement document Schedule B are incorrect.

As the WSWS has previously documented, Kinetic’s proposal also contains a host of onerous clauses.

By clause 6.3, “Rosters can be changed with as little as 24 hours’ notice.” 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 TWU or other bargaining representatives.

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.”

Last year, the TWU leaders imposed real wage-cutting agreements covering workers at Kinetic and three other major bus operators in Melbourne.

Dissatisfaction over many years with betrayals by the TWU and other unions has led to the formation of the Surfside “independent bargaining” group, which has registered status from the FWC. However, it is working

within the straitjacket of the anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws, which were first introduced in the 1990s by the Keating Labor government, in partnership with the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

We urge the Surfside workers to vote “no” in Kinetic’s ballot, but that 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, to oppose the betrayal.

These committees would determine and issue demands in the interests of workers, not the bus companies and the rest of the corporate ruling class, 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 fighting a similar bid by the Unite union to sell out their three-month campaign 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 support and join the fight of 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 to coordinate and lead workers’ struggles globally against the deepening business-government attacks on living and working conditions.

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