

Bus workers on Australia's Gold and Tweed Coast to strike again after overwhelmingly rejecting Kinetic's "offer"

Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
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More than 650 drivers and cleaners/refuellers employed by the global bus conglomerate Kinetic on Australia's Gold and Tweed Coasts are set to strike again for 24 hours on Friday after voting by 77 percent to reject the company's derisory proposed enterprise agreement.

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 fighting for decent pay and conditions against 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 stoppage will halt bus services—the area's primary public transport—and school bus runs in a region of more than 700,000 people spanning the Queensland-New South Wales border, the country's sixth largest urban concentration.

However, the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which covers about half the Gold-Tweed Coast workers at Surfside Buslines, a Kinetic subsidiary, is keeping other bus workers in the dark about the struggle. That includes Kinetic workers all along Australia's east coast who are facing similar battles.

A Kinetic worker from Mackay in central Queensland told the WSWS that workers there back the Surfside workers but have heard nothing from the TWU.

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

Commenting on the 77 percent "no" vote in Kinetic's ballot, a Surfside worker condemned the national silence from the TWU. She told the WSWS: "Well if they [Kinetic] are still dealing in pennies and cents, it's going nowhere. We need to feel valued. It comes through by the remuneration we are offered... Obviously there is less complacency, and more support from drivers is apparent, which is good."

Last Wednesday, totally behind the backs of the bus workers, the TWU postponed the 24-hour stoppage, originally scheduled for this Monday, in order to allow the company's ballot to go ahead. The union made an undertaking in the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal industrial tribunal, to delay the strike after Kinetic applied for an order to stop the action.

That undertaking was a warning that the TWU is preparing another sellout, like it has imposed on transport workers across the country for years. The union bureaucrats are anxious to isolate and scuttle this major struggle as soon as possible, to prevent it from winning wider support from workers.

TWU Queensland director of organising, Jared Abbott, told Gold Coast media that Kinetic was not "coming to the table," even though drivers had not had a pay rise in two years.

The Mackay Kinetic driver said workers at his depot had joined the TWU last year, but had not heard from the union since. He was now "pissed off" with the TWU. Kinetic took over the bus services in Mackay last year under a contract from the state Labor government, as it has in other Queensland regional cities.

In applying to the FWC last week for a suspension order, Kinetic utilised the anti-strike Fair Work Act,

which the Albanese Labor government amended in December to strengthen the powers of the FWC to block industrial action by workers.

The “independent bargaining representative”—a group covering Surfside workers dissatisfied with the TWU—was excluded from the FWC hearing, but later agreed to also postpone the stoppage to this Friday.

The Surfside workers voted by more than 90 percent last October to reject Kinetic’s initial deal. Despite three 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.

As the WSWS has previously documented, Kinetic’s proposal also contains a host of onerous clauses. By clause 6.3, rosters could 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 would only have 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 would commit 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 a Surfside “independent bargaining” group, which has registered status from the FWC. However, it is working within the anti-strike enterprise bargaining regime, which was first introduced in the 1990s by the Keating Labor government, in partnership with the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

The strong “no” vote 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 at depots, independent of the union officials, to stop a 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 speaking out against the Unite trade union after it cancelled their three-month strike. Unite’s anti-democratic action, ramming through a below-inflation pay deal via a non-binding consultative ballot, has produced widespread anger.

We urge all workers, including the SkyBus, Greyhound 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 invite Kinetic and other workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party so we can assist them in forming rank-and-file committees. These committees are building the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to coordinate and lead workers’ struggles globally against the business-government attacks on living and working conditions.

Contact the SEP:

Phone: (02) 8218 3222

Email: sep@sep.org.au

Facebook: [SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia](https://www.facebook.com/SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia)

Twitter: [@SEP_Australia](https://twitter.com/SEP_Australia)

Instagram: [socialistequalityparty_au](https://www.instagram.com/socialistequalityparty_au)

TikTok: [@sep_australia](https://www.tiktok.com/@sep_australia)

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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