

Australian union halts Gold-Tweed Coast bus strikes to try to impose sellout deal with Kinetic

Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
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On Thursday, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) went behind the backs of 650 bus drivers and cleaners/refuelers employed by global bus conglomerate Kinetic on Australia's Gold and Tweed Coasts to call off their stoppages for better pay, conditions and safety.

This is a blatant betrayal. At the very last minute, without any consultation with the workers, the TWU cancelled a 24-hour strike that was due to go ahead yesterday. It announced an "interim agreement" with Kinetic, keeping secret the fact that the deal includes a pledge to prevent further stoppages until mid-year.

The pact with Kinetic is based on the same proposed company enterprise agreement that the workers just voted to reject by 77 percent in a company ballot. The TWU has released no detail about Thursday's deal except that it includes an 8.2 percent wage rise for the current year, which Kinetic had already offered, and which workers have opposed as inadequate.

That increase would take drivers' base rate to just \$30 an hour, and cleaners/refuellers to just above \$23 an hour—far below the soaring cost of living and even the \$35 an hour that the TWU had originally promised to seek last year.

An angry driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "This is a sellout. The TWU did not take it to their members. I will be calling for a no vote on this deal. Most people are not happy with \$30 an hour."

The driver said the union and Kinetic were drafting a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that retained the company's rejected two-year enterprise agreement. There was the possibility of an improved pay offer for the second year, but that was not guaranteed.

The TWU's no-strike pledge is an attempt to demobilise and shut down the discontent among bus workers while it continues backroom talks. TWU Queensland director of organising Jared Abbott boasted to the media of an "excellent pragmatic solution" to the dispute.

Kinetic's South East Queensland general manager James Saltmer was equally pleased. He said Kinetic thanked "all bargaining representatives for progressing a new agreement,"

with "negotiations continuing."

In an "11th hour" email sent to workers on Thursday, the TWU said it would hold "paid yard meetings with members" next week to discuss "our plan for the future." This would include "ballots for further strike action if an agreement cannot be reached."

Having just voted overwhelmingly "no" to Kinetic's proposed agreement, workers should reject this sellout, resume their stoppages and call for support throughout the working class. They should form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the TWU, to determine and coordinate their campaign.

Thursday's last-minute cancellation of yesterday's strike at Surfside Buslines, a Kinetic subsidiary, was the second such anti-democratic move by the TWU in rapid succession. Last week, the TWU postponed the 24-hour stoppage, originally scheduled for last Monday, in order to allow the company's ballot to go ahead.

As the WSWS warned, that "postponement" was a forewarning that the TWU was preparing another betrayal, like it inflicted on bus drivers in Melbourne last year, and like it has imposed on transport workers across the country for years. The union bureaucrats are anxious to isolate and scuttle the major struggle on the Gold and Tweed Coasts as soon as possible, to prevent it from winning wider support from workers.

The stand taken by the Kinetic workers—yesterday's stoppage was to be their third strike in six weeks—has threatened to win broader backing in the working class, despite the TWU keeping its more than 60,000 members elsewhere in the dark.

On the Gold and Tweed Coasts, Australia's sixth largest urban area, the Surfside workers are fighting 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.

Aided by low wages and cost-cutting, Kinetic is continuing to gobble up bus companies operating lucrative government-contracted services throughout Australia—most recently O'Driscoll Coaches Derwent Valley Link, which operates

between Hobart and the Derwent Valley in Tasmania.

The TWU's deal with Kinetic does not include any restoration of payment for public holidays for workers not rostered on—a clause the TWU agreed to drop as part of its last sellout in 2018. The agreement would also allow management to keep speeding up schedules and maintain poor conditions—from inadequate or non-existent toilet and meal facilities to lack of safety and badly-maintained buses.

As the WSWs has previously documented, Kinetic's proposal contains a host of onerous clauses. Rosters could be changed with as little as 24 hours' notice. "Consultation" and "dispute resolution" clauses would be bolstered to help the TWU prevent discontent from erupting. A key clause would commit the "parties"—that is the TWU and other bargaining representatives—to seek to "achieve an efficient and mutually beneficial relationship."

An "independent bargaining representative"—a group covering Surfside workers dissatisfied with the TWU's long history of betrayals—was excluded from Thursday's pact struck by the TWU. However, the group is advocating only a marginally improved version of the TWU deal.

This group, which has registered status from the Fair Work Commission, the federal pro-business industrial tribunal, 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.

A strong "no" vote at yard meetings would be a first step in halting the TWU sellout. Lessons must be drawn from the repeated betrayals by the TWU and other trade unions. They are enforcing the interests of the financial elite and its political servants, including the Albanese government, which is calling for "sacrifices" from workers amid the inflationary spiral and economic crisis of capitalism.

Workers need to establish genuine democratically controlled rank-and-file committees at the yards, independent of the union bureaucrats, to decide and issue demands in the interests of workers, not the employers, and reach out to other workers, throughout the country and internationally, for support.

That includes the SkyBus, Greyhound and other Kinetic workers in Melbourne and elsewhere, and the bus drivers in Brisbane and other cities.

It also includes the Kinetic and other bus drivers in London, where workers at Abellio, another transport corporation, are denouncing the Unite trade union after it cancelled their three-month strike. Unite's anti-democratic action, ramming through a below-inflation pay deal, has produced widespread danger.

In the UK, this opposition is being led by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee (LBRFC). 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 union sellouts.

We invite Kinetic and ~~contact~~ workers to Equality Party (SEP) so we can assist them in forming such 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.

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 socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of every aspect of society, including essential public transport, to the profit interests of big business. That 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.

The SEP is standing candidates in the March 25 New South Wales state election to advance the necessity for such a socialist program and party to fight the bipartisan Labor-Liberal program of real pay cutting, austerity, war and "let it rip" COVID policies. We appeal to bus workers, and all workers, to promote and participate in our campaign and to join the SEP.

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