

Australia's Gold-Tweed Coast bus workers fight to prevent another union betrayal at Kinetic

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Bus drivers and cleaners/refuellers employed by global bus conglomerate Kinetic on the Gold and Tweed Coasts, Australia's sixth biggest urban area, are trying to stop another looming sellout bid by the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

Disenchanted workers, represented by an officially-registered "Independent Bargaining Representative" (IBR) group, are taking limited industrial action, such as refusing to operate ticketing machines, to oppose a deal struck by the TWU with management in February, and to prevent a similar betrayal on a proposed second year of an enterprise agreement.

In February, without holding a vote, the TWU suddenly called off a series of half-day and one-day strikes by the bus workers over low pay, unsafe conditions and a lack of facilities. The union quickly signed a memorandum of understanding with the company that took drivers' base rate to just \$30 an hour, and cleaners/refuellers to just above \$23 an hour—despite workers having voted by 77 percent to reject that in a company ballot.

The TWU tried to justify February's betrayal by saying it would deliver a pay rise until a new two-year enterprise agreement could be negotiated with the company. In reality, the TWU was anxious to prevent the militant stand by the Gold and Tweed Coast workers from spreading to other Kinetic operations across the country and internationally.

Kinetic is Australia and New Zealand's most extensive bus network with over 7,300 employees, and 90 contracts with governments and municipal councils. It further boasts of employing, with its partner, Go-Ahead, more than 34,000 transport workers globally, from the UK to Singapore and New Zealand. It runs a quarter of London's buses for Transport for London and operates rail services in the UK, Norway and Germany.

Many Kinetic workers are concerned that another rotten deal is about to be struck to entrench and complete the February sellout. A May 2 "news bulletin" from

management said Kinetic and the TWU and other bargaining representatives were close to finalising a "multi-year agreement." It stated that "the majority of clauses have now been closed out" and foreshadowed that the proposed agreement, once settled, would be put to a vote.

The bulletin also crowed that the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal government's pro-business industrial tribunal, had dismissed a challenge by the IBR group to the poor casual workers' rates in the previous TWU-company 2018 enterprise agreement. The tribunal ruled that the enterprise agreement passed the Better Off Overall Test (BOOT) under the Labor government's Fair Work Act.

That is another indication of the pro-employer character of Labor's laws and the FWC—which is not a neutral "umpire"—and of the readiness of the trade union bureaucrats to enforce the legislation. It is also a further warning of the kinds of retrograde conditions that Kinetic and the TWU will try to impose in a new agreement.

The fight taken up by the Gold and Tweed Coast Kinetic workers has an international significance. Transport workers, and all workers, around the world are experiencing an immense cost-of-living crisis and intensifying attacks on living and social conditions by employers and governments.

A bus driver involved in the ongoing struggle against Kinetic said the company was refusing to budge on workers' demands for decent pay and conditions. Moreover, the Albanese Labor government's May 9 federal budget would not help the reality that the prices were soaring for everything, but wages were not keeping up.

The driver, who needed to remain anonymous, said: "The cost of living is going through the roof. Everyone is crying out for more pay, but nothing is coming through at Kinetic, or anywhere else. I just went shopping with my wife and the prices are increasing for everything. We stock up on items on special that are not perishable. We are more selective on fruit and vegetables, and we are not eating meat so often—just once or twice a week.

“Even our electricity bill has gone up from around \$340 to \$580 a quarter. We have no kids at home, and no mortgage or rent to pay but it is damned difficult for those families that do. And there is not much on the horizon.”

He was very concerned about the housing crisis and rising homelessness, including in the state of Queensland and its capital of Brisbane. “All these tent structures going up all over Brisbane! People at work have seen their rents go up by \$150 to \$300 a week. And every time the interest rates go up by another 0.25 percent, that adds a couple of hundred dollars a week to those with mortgages.”

By contrast, the government was spending a lot of money on the military, and he hoped the government would retract the planned \$17,000-a-year income tax cuts for wealthy individuals. He added that he opposed privatisation, such as had occurred with the contracting of bus services to operators like Kinetic.

The worker said: “Public utilities should be in the hands of the public. In private hands it is only for profit. The essentials, like water, electricity and shelter, have to be in public ownership. They are being sold off for more money.”

The TWU’s February deal with Kinetic did 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 February deal also allowed management to keep speeding up schedules and to maintain shoddy conditions—from inadequate or non-existent toilet and meal facilities to a lack of safety and badly-maintained buses.

As the WSWs has documented, Kinetic’s proposed enterprise agreement contained 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.”

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

The IBR group covering workers dissatisfied with the TWU’s long history of betrayals is advocating only a marginally improved version of the TWU deal. This group, which has registered status at the FWC, is working within the narrow confines of 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 much broader fight is necessary to defeat Kinetic, a conglomerate that epitomises the grip of giant financial transnationals over every aspect of society. The company’s two major shareholders are OPTrust and the Infrastructure Capital Group (ICG), with local management retaining a minor shareholding. OPTrust manages one of Canada’s largest pension funds with over \$US20 billion in assets, while ICG is an Australian infrastructure firm with \$2.8 billion of funds under management.

Kinetic workers say that the local shareholders include TWUSUPER, the transport industry’s union-management \$6 billion-plus superannuation fund. That gives the TWU, whose officials sit on the TWUSUPER board, a vested interest in maintaining poor wages and conditions for Kinetic workers.

To fight this line-up, Kinetic workers need to 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, and reach out to other workers. That includes the SkyBus, Greyhound and other Kinetic workers in Melbourne, Brisbane and elsewhere, such as the Kinetic and other bus drivers in London who have formed the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

We urge Kinetic and other workers to contact the Socialist 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.

Contact the SEP:
Phone: (02) 8218 3222
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