

Public transport workers in the Philippines face huge job losses

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Last week, more than 10,000 jeepney drivers and owners marched in the Philippine capital of Metro Manila and other parts of the country to protest the government's Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Plan (PUVMP), which will revoke single-jeepney franchises and their ability to operate. Jeepneys are minibuses that provide public transportation for millions, particularly workers and the poor.

The rallies on January 16 followed a 12-day strike last month and were led by the transport organization MANIBELA and the transport federation PISTON. The march in Manila was blocked by the police a few kilometers from the Mendiola Bridge, located near the presidential residence, the Malacañang Palace. The bridge is the traditional site for protests in the Philippines. Fuming at the police action, the march participants held a rally in front of the police line-up and refused to disperse until well into the night.

Police reportedly prevented contingents of protestors from the provinces of Bulacan, Pampanga, Cavite, and Laguna from joining the protest in Metro Manila.

In Bacolod city on Negros Island, jeepney drivers and operators blocked a street and held a rally for two hours.

The single-jeepney franchises of the protesting drivers and operators are only valid until January 31, with franchises under the PUVMP to be issued only to either cooperatives or corporations operating at least 15 jeepneys or minibuses.

According to the government, 112,801 of the 150,867 jeepneys throughout the country have already been consolidated into cooperatives. While estimates vary, more than 38,000 jeepneys could be removed from the streets. With each jeepney operated usually by its owner and another driver in two shifts or more, nearly 80,000 drivers and operators could lose their only

source of meager income, even as inflation rose to 6 percent in 2023 and two million are unemployed.

The administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has falsely promised that the modernization program will lead to better working conditions, fixed monthly wages, and government-mandated social benefits. In reality, drivers will remain piece-rate workers, forced to earn the price of renting the jeepneys as well as pay for fuel and maintenance before they can receive a meager cut of the jeepneys' income.

The first phase of the PUVMP forces jeepney operators and owners to consolidate into cooperatives and corporations, ending their single vehicle proprietorship. Once consolidated, the second phase will saddle these organizations with massive private debts to fund the replacement of all diesel-fueled jeepneys with more environmentally friendly but expensive minibuses.

The debts stemming from the modernization will bankrupt hundreds of the cooperatives and corporations. According to a University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies policy brief, modern jeepneys cost around 2.8 million pesos (about \$US50,000) as against a traditional jeepney worth between 200,000 pesos and 400,000 pesos.

The brief stated, "A jeepney operator, on average, earns a daily gross income of 2,500 to 3,000 pesos. Expenses—fuel, maintenance, and payments for the jeepney driver (typically at 500 pesos)—reduce that income. The cost of a modern jeepney is well beyond the price of a traditional jeepney, and greatly exceeds the financial capacity of jeepney drivers and operators."

Existing cooperatives are buckling under the strain of their bank debts. According to Ricardo Rebaño, president of the Federation of Jeepney Operators and

Drivers Association of the Philippines, operators organized into a cooperative or corporation need to make a monthly repayment of 475,000 pesos on loans for the operation of 15 modern jeepneys.

“We have nearly negative earnings daily, sometimes just breaking even. How can we survive for seven years?” Rebaño stated, referring to their payment period for modern jeepneys.

The Philippines relies heavily on buses and the ubiquitous jeepneys, descendants of ancient, backyard-customized former United States jeeps from World War II. There is no public mass transportation of railways, subways, or metro rails. The National Capital Region has only four public railway lines. There are none in any other major cities.

In Metro Manila alone, over 43,000 jeepney franchises and over 830 bus franchises have been issued on more than 900 routes. Over 75 percent of jeepney operators own just one vehicle, with just 2 percent of operators owning more than five vehicles.

For decades, the ruling elites tolerated the jeepneys as they themselves zoomed to their offices and mansions in air-conditioned Mercedes-Benzes. However, as the economy fully integrated into the global economy and the working population boomed in the early 2000s, the traffic situation deteriorated.

Notoriously, in the capital itself, massive traffic jams cost “roughly \$US51 million per day due to lost working-hours, additional fuel consumption, health costs caused by air pollution, and loss of investment opportunities,” according to one government study. People in the capital spend as much as three hours stuck in traffic going to their jobs and up to another three hours stuck in traffic going home.

In implementing the PUVMP program in collaboration with the German and Japanese governments, the Marcos administration is forcing working people to pay for a solution to this problem through fare increases, job losses for tens of thousands of jeepney drivers, and by expropriating the small capital of the jeepney operators. The drivers and operators are some of the poorest sections of the Filipino working class and petty bourgeoisie respectively.

As the single-franchise expiration date approaches, the transport organization MANIBELA and the transport federation PISTON have vowed further

protests. A petition filed by PISTON is currently pending at the Philippine Supreme Court to suspend the implementation of the PUVMP.

However, PISTON and MANIBELA are not workers’ organizations. They are dominated by better-off layers of jeepney operators and advance only a single demand: the reauthorization of their franchises.

Both MANIBELA and PISTON, which is aligned with Maoist organizations, seek to convince drivers and operators that they can plead to the ruling class to take pity on their plight rather than build a movement led by the working class. They issue no working-class demands. This perspective will inevitably lead to defeat.

Jeepney drivers must break from the leaderships of the transport organizations, form independent rank-and-file organizations, and advance their own demands. A public modern mass transport system affordable to workers and providing decent jobs for drivers can only be built by the appropriation of the vast wealth held by the tiny ruling elite in the Philippines. This requires a turn to workers throughout the country and internationally on a socialist perspective.



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