

Australia: Victorian bus drivers strike over pay and conditions

John Wilson, Martin Scott
7 July 2025

More than 600 bus drivers in Melbourne and regional Victoria, employed by ComfortDelGro Victoria (CDC), have held three one-day strikes in recent weeks, in opposition to further real wage cuts and attacks on working conditions.

CDC Victoria is an Australian subsidiary of global transport company ComfortDelGro, which last year recorded revenue of SG\$4.48 billion (US\$3.5 billion) and operating profits of SG\$210.5 million (US\$165 million). At 18 percent, Australia is the company's third largest source of revenue, after Singapore and Britain.

Drivers have rejected CDC's offer of a nominal pay rise of just 7.5 percent over three years, and in the fourth year, a rise pegged to either the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in Melbourne, or Average Weekly Earnings (AWE) for regional drivers. This is far short of what is required to keep up with the soaring cost of living.

The latest CPI from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) puts inflation at 2.4 percent, just 0.1 percentage points lower than this wage offer. But official inflation figures vastly understate the real rise in living costs for working-class households, driven above all by the skyrocketing cost of housing. The March quarter Selected Living Cost Indexes, also from the ABS, showed that the cost of living for employee households rose 3.4 percent over the past year.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), which covers the drivers, initially advanced a demand for 7 percent per annum pay rises in a three-year deal. This would still fall short of recouping the losses incurred under the previous union-management agreement, which saw nominal wages increase by 8.11 percent over three years, while CPI rose 14.9 percent.

The massive real wage cut in the previous agreement was jointly imposed by CDC and the TWU bureaucracy, through the use of a statistical trick. Twice-yearly wage increases were tied to the change in Average Weekly

Earnings (AWE) across the state, as recorded by the ABS.

The WSWS explained at the time: "Linking wage growth to AWE has an insidious logic: Every sub-inflationary deal struck by management, government and the unions lowers the benchmark to which wages are pegged, further entrenching the suppression of pay."

The 2022 union-management deal also added clauses to the enterprise agreement allowing the company to introduce "on-road meal breaks," in which drivers are not able to return to their depot for meals. In many cases, this means parking up and eating behind the wheel of the bus, often with limited access to toilet facilities.

At the second strike, on June 16, one driver told WSWS reporters "everyone is unhappy" about the requirement to have meal breaks on the road, but he didn't know if the TWU was demanding that it be scrapped.

Other drivers said that at some places where they have their breaks, including Caroline Springs and Watergardens, in Melbourne's outer northwest, they have to choose between using the toilet or having lunch, because there is not enough time to do both.

Drivers also reported that many buses are in poor condition and increasingly unreliable, with a lot of them more than two decades old.

In addition, drivers are seeking to reverse the trend of casualisation. Currently, around 15 percent of the workforce is not permanently employed.

Bus drivers at CDC are angry about the continued attacks on their wages and conditions, and determined to fight. But the WSWS understands that the TWU has now dropped its already inadequate pay claim to just 6 percent a year. This should be a stark warning to drivers that the union bureaucracy is working with management to prepare another sell-out compromise deal.

From the outset, the TWU bureaucracy has sought to limit the strike action. One driver told the WSWS that while workers had called for an indefinite strike, union

officials had insisted that they be restricted to sporadic 24-hour stoppages.

Moreover, the union leadership is seeking to isolate the striking workers. Facing similar attacks on wages and conditions, drivers at three major bus companies have voted in favour of strikes over recent months, with a fourth, Ventura, likely to follow suit. But the bureaucracy has prevented a statewide action.

The first strike, on May 28, involved some 1,300 workers, from CDC as well as Dysons, making it the largest bus drivers' strike in the state's history. But, just days before what would have been a second joint strike on June 16, Dysons announced that workers had voted—by the narrowest of margins, just 51 percent in favour—to accept a revised offer of a meagre 13 percent wage rise over three years.

While the TWU did not openly promote the Dysons offer ahead of the vote, the bureaucracy was quick to endorse it after the fact. Director of organising in Victoria and Tasmania Sam Lynch stated: “Although the Dysons agreement falls short of what we would have liked, members should be proud of the progress we made.”

Underscoring that this was a promise to management that the TWU bureaucracy would do everything possible to ram through a similar rotten deal at CDC, Lynch continued: “We want to get this resolved as quickly as possible.”

The third strike, on July 3, was slated to include more than 300 workers at Kinetic as well, and be held outside Victorian Trades Hall in the Melbourne CBD. But without explanation, the TWU leadership called off the Kinetic workers' action and relocated the CDC demonstration to one of the company's depots in the outer western suburbs.

A fourth strike, this time involving both Kinetic and CDC workers, has now been called for July 10, with rallies in Melbourne, Ballarat, Geelong and Mildura. This is clearly a response to the demands of drivers for joint action. But a bigger fight against the bus companies, in and of itself, is not the answer.

The attack on bus drivers' pay and conditions raises the fundamental question of the privatisation of vital public services, including transport. Under this arrangement, introduced in Victoria by the Liberal-National government in the 1990s, but supported and renewed by every Labor government since, bus services are not operated according to the needs of passengers and drivers, but the profit demands of private corporations and their shareholders.

While the contracts, setting out how the Labor government funds the bus companies, shield the private operators from increases in the cost of fuel and other input costs, there are no similar measures to ensure wages match inflation. This means that profit margins are directly linked to how much the private operators can squeeze workers.

The reality is that Labor is in total agreement with the efforts of transport operators to drive down wages and conditions. Labor governments, state and federal, have spearheaded the attack on wages, imposing successive real wage cuts throughout the public sector.

The role of the Labor government is covered up by the TWU bureaucracy, for several reasons: To prevent exposing the role of the union apparatus in enforcing the cost-cutting demands of business and government; and because the TWU, like all the unions, is not just a political and financial supporter of Labor and its governments, but an integral component of them, with leading bureaucrats serving on the party's main executive bodies.

To avoid another sell-out at the hands of the TWU bureaucracy, bus drivers in Victoria need a new perspective, and new organisations through which to fight for it.

Rank-and-file committees, led by workers, not bureaucrats, must be built in every depot, as the means through which workers can take matters into their own hands. Through these committees, which should include workers from throughout the bus operations, not just drivers, workers can link up with wider layers of the working class, throughout the transport sector and more broadly, to take up a unified struggle against the relentless assault on workers' jobs, pay and conditions.

This poses the need for a socialist perspective and a fight for workers' governments, under which vital public services, including transport and health, along with major corporations and the banks, would be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control and operated to serve the needs of working people and society, rather than the profit demands of the wealthy elite.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact