

New Zealand: Wellington transport workers face attacks on jobs and conditions

By our correspondents
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Wellington bus drivers stopped work for five hours on May 26 after the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) announced it would offer numbers of bus routes to competing operators to slash costs. A drivers' stopwork meeting was also held in nearby Porirua and Kapiti on May 31.

Tranzit Group is the council's preferred bidder to operate eight bus contracts in Wellington, and UZABus would take over a contract in Kapiti, north of Wellington, starting in July 2018. Currently the Wellington routes are operated by NZ Bus, a subsidiary of transport company Infratil.

About 300 drivers and other bus workers, members of the Tramways Union, voted unanimously not to sign any new agreement with Tranzit unless pay and conditions remained unchanged.

This follows the Labour and Greens-dominated council's decision to privatise commuter rail services last year. French-based multinational Transdev took over passenger rail services from Tranz Metro, part of the state-owned KiwiRail, in the lower North Island covering the Kapiti, Hutt Valley, Johnsonville and Wairarapa lines.

Once Tranzit completes negotiations with GWRC it will control 60 percent of the capital's bus services while NZ Bus will be reduced to 28 percent from its current 73 percent share.

Tranzit managing director Paul Snelgrove said it would hire 380 drivers presently employed by NZ Bus. NZ Bus has around 650 workers in Wellington, including 500 drivers.

The Council's transport arm Metlink said there would be the same number of bus drivers but did not rule out job losses under the deal.

There is a real threat of wage cuts. Senior Wellington bus drivers are currently paid just \$19.35 an hour and

rely on weekend and overtime penalty rates, including double time on Sundays and time-and-a-half on Saturdays. According to Fairfax Media, Tranzit wants flat hourly wages between \$19 and \$22 and no overtime rates.

The chairman of the 13-member GWRC, former Labour Party politician Chris Laidlaw, boasted on May 4 that the Tranzit and UZABus takeovers were "expected to reduce operating costs by several million dollars a year," but did not specify how this would be achieved other than through more energy-efficient vehicles.

The council is implementing the National Party government's "public transport operating model," implemented in 2013, to promote "competition" to drive down costs and boost profits at the expense of the working class. The model targets passenger services for privatisation, to create "less reliance on [government] subsidy" and introduce "fully commercial," profit-driven services.

Since 2008, the National government has sold other state-owned companies, like coal miner Solid Energy, cut thousands of public service jobs, slashed public housing and threatened to privatise KiwiRail.

Rail company Transdev has saved thousands of dollars on its wages bill in its first collective agreement with the trade unions from July 2016 to July 2017, as part of a promise to save the GWRC \$100 million over 15 years. It claims this is being accomplished by improving on-time performance, reliability and customer patronage.

The truth is savings will be realised through attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. Transdev gave workers a paltry 2 percent wage rise last year, barely above the 1.6 percent official inflation rate and well below the spiralling cost of living, especially for housing. This

was agreed by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) in a “Memorandum of Understanding” which falsely promised the “same or more favourable” wages and conditions.

GWRC transport spokesman Paul Swain, another former Labour Party MP, claimed last year there were 1,000 more seats on commuter rail services. This has meant extra carriages and inadequate staffing levels, moves opposed by train managers and ticket collectors. Workers are being subjected to a harsh new “performance-based” regime. Many were not properly paid their penalty and holiday rates in the Christmas and New Year period, and a “points system” now tracks “excessive” sick leave.

The trade unions have collaborated in imposing these conditions. Council of Trade Unions (CTU) president Richard Wagstaff told Radio NZ the new 2018 Wellington bus contract was a “commercial process” that keeps “workers in the dark.” But he glorified the Transdev contract, misleadingly stating that it retained the “same or more favourable” terms as under the state-owned operator. He held up this anti-worker contract as something the council should have emulated for bus workers.

The Tramways Union invited Labour Party MP Trevor Mallard to its May 26 meeting to posture as an opponent of the GWRC’s deal with Tranzit. Mallard represents the same party that, on the GWRC, is attacking bus and rail workers today and, during the 1980s, oversaw mass redundancies in public transport and the privatisation of the rail network.

The RMTU recently issued a bargaining notice to Transdev to begin negotiations for a new collective agreement. On April 27, RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson spoke in the Transdev lunchroom at Wellington railway station declaring his “very passionate” support for increasing wages. Under Transdev and its predecessors, ticket clippers have been paid between \$15 and \$17 an hour.

The union has no intention of fighting for a meaningful raise. The WSWS understands that some train managers and engineers put in wage remit claims for 15 percent increases to the union, and Butson accused them of making excessive demands that would require “months of strikes.”

Nationally, fast food workers at Restaurant Brands, disability support workers at IDEA Services, and meat

processing workers at the Wellington-based Preston company have all recently demanded better wages and conditions. In each case, workers are ensnared by union bureaucracies devoted to negotiating low-wage, pro-company contracts whilst wearing down workers with limited industrial action and isolated protests aimed at letting off steam.

The transport unions have spent decades collaborating with Labour and National governments alike to suppress strikes and enforce privatisations and job cuts. They will intensify their efforts in the lead up to the national election in September, with the Labour Party making only limited criticisms of the National government’s latest austerity budget and agreeing to keep cutting social spending.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on bus and rail workers to unify their struggles in opposition to the class collaboration program of the trade unions. For workers to halt the assault on jobs, wages and conditions they need to break from the unions and build their own independent rank-and-file committees. These would forge links with workers facing similar attacks in New Zealand and internationally, including bus and rail workers in Australia. Above all, workers need a socialist perspective, which would include placing the transport companies and other major corporations under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

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