

New Zealand union shuts down bus drivers' strike, scapegoats migrants for low wages

By Tom Peters
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About 800 bus drivers in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, carried out partial strike action last month against low wages and poor working conditions, including long hours and split shifts. Bus drivers are among the lowest paid workers in Auckland, which has some of the least affordable rents in the world. On working days which can span 14 hours, they often earn below \$17.70 an hour, the legal minimum wage.

FIRST Union and Tramways Union members at NZ Bus, the city's largest bus operator, took action after rejecting a pay offer amounting to an extra 44 cents an hour. The proposed rise, of about 2 percent, was well below the increase in the cost of living. On December 7, the company suspended 100 drivers for refusing to take fares from passengers. Hundreds of drivers marched through Queen Street on December 9 protesting the lockout. For four days, as many as half the city's bus services were cancelled.

The drivers' action followed two years of escalating strikes in New Zealand, including by tens of thousands of nurses, doctors and teachers. This is part of an international resurgence of class struggle, as workers seek to fight back against the austerity imposed by governments and corporations over the past 10 years.

In every case, however, the main obstacle to a sustained, unified fight is the trade union bureaucracy. The unions do not represent workers; they are pro-capitalist organisations, working with employers and politicians to shut down strikes and divide the working class.

The bus unions called off industrial action on December 13, after the Labour Party-run Auckland Council passed a motion asking the council-owned agency Auckland Transport, which contracts services from NZ Bus, to work with the company "and the relevant unions to find a solution to end the current

dispute."

FIRST Union described the motion, which was written with union input, as an "important win." In fact, it was a manoeuvre designed to shut down the strike and send drivers back to work having won nothing. A union spokesperson told the media: "There's no point in the public, our drivers, or the company suffering [from an ongoing strike]." Negotiations with NZ Bus are continuing behind closed doors.

Stuff noted that Auckland Mayor Phil Goff, who backed the resolution after previously refusing to intervene in the dispute, "can deliver his part... without necessarily committing the council or its agency, to anything on the funding front." Goff merely agreed to write to the Labour Party-led government requesting an expedited review of the Public Transport Operating Model (PTOM) so that "a fair and equitable resolution is reached around drivers' wages and working conditions" on a national level.

Asked by *Stuff* whether the solution was to simply hire more drivers and increase pay, Transport Minister Phil Twyford said this would be "expensive." He evasively declared it was "tough logistically and practically to think of a solution" and stated that the government wanted to work "with the industry."

The PTOM review has already been underway for more than nine months. The Labour Party has ditched its 2017 election promise to improve pay for bus drivers. It has done nothing to change the system in which private companies bid for council transport contracts by engaging in a race to the bottom on wages and conditions.

After shutting down the strike, FIRST Union sought to divert attention from its role in defending the company by rounding on migrant workers for

supposedly undermining wages. On December 16, spokesman Jared Abbott criticised the government for allowing NZ Bus to “bring in” foreigners “if their current workforce aren’t willing to work for those rates.”

Abbott claimed the union was motivated by “concern” about migrant workers being “exploited.” People on insecure work visas depend heavily on their employer and risk deportation if they lose their job. The Ardern government has shifted more migrants onto these visas while making it harder to gain permanent residency.

Exploitation of migrants is certainly rampant, but the trade unions’ response is the thoroughly reactionary demand for them to be blocked from entering the country. The exploitative conditions faced by all sections of transport workers, moreover, are the direct result of the cost-cutting agenda imposed for decades by the unions themselves.

NZ Bus recruited 28 drivers from the Philippines last year, 16 in Auckland and 12 in Wellington. According to Radio NZ, three more visa applications, supported by NZ Bus, are currently being assessed by Immigration NZ. If the union bureaucracy had its way, these would be denied and presumably those migrants already working for NZ Bus would be sent back to their impoverished home countries.

FIRST Union’s statements are particularly provocative given that the transport industry employs large numbers of immigrants, while more than a quarter of New Zealand’s population was born overseas. The union aims to sow divisions among workers and thus prevent any fight against the bus companies, Auckland Council and the government.

FIRST Union has repeatedly lobbied to prevent workers entering the country. In 2018 it successfully opposed an application by bus company Ritchies to recruit 110 migrant workers from the Philippines, Tonga, Samoa and Fiji. The union’s Graham McKean told Newshub, “bringing bus drivers in to take over the work that New Zealanders should be doing is wrong.”

Similarly, in 2018 the Unite union applauded a Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment decision to ban Burger King from hiring migrant workers for a year.

Some of the foulest anti-immigrant propaganda appears on the *Daily Blog*, which is supported by

Unite, the Rail and Maritime Transport Union and the Dairy Workers Union. On January 3 editor Martyn Bradbury called for voting rights to be stripped from permanent residents (i.e. recent immigrants) and demanded that Australians be prevented from moving to New Zealand to escape catastrophic fires caused by climate change.

The Labour-led government is likewise seeking to divert anger over rising social inequality by whipping up xenophobia. Minister for Regional Development Shane Jones—a member of the racist NZ First Party which plays a major role in the government—recently expressed anxiety about NZ’s low “birth rates” and “legions” of Indian immigrants “queue-jumping and clogging up our social services.” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern did not denounce Jones’ repulsive statements, which echoed the fascist views of the Christchurch terrorist.

Workers must reject the nationalist poison of the unions and the Ardern government and demand the right for working people to live and work anywhere in the world, with all the rights of citizens. To wage a real fight, transport workers must be armed with a socialist and internationalist program. Billions of dollars should be redirected from the super-rich to provide decent public transport services with well-paid staff.

The reactionary politics of the unions demonstrates the need for new organisations: rank-and-file committees, controlled by the workers themselves and politically independent of Labour and every capitalist party. Such organisations must fight to unite workers throughout New Zealand—native-born and immigrants—with workers in Australia, Asia and the Pacific against the capitalist system that exploits them all.

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