

**Submission
No 28**

**ELECTRIC BUSES IN REGIONAL AND METROPOLITAN PUBLIC
TRANSPORT NETWORKS IN NSW**

Organisation: Transport Workers' Union of New South Wales

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**Submission to the Inquiry into Electric Buses in Regional and Metropolitan Public
Transport Networks in NSW**

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The Transport Workers' Union of New South Wales

1 About the TWU

The Transport Workers' Union of New South Wales (**TWU**) represents tens of thousands of men and women in the State's aviation, oil, waste management, gas, road transport, passenger vehicle and freight logistics industries.

With over one hundred years' experience representing the workers who conduct the State's crucial passenger and freight transport tasks, the TWU has been proactive in advocating for the establishment and improvement of industry standards which advance the lives and safety of transport workers, their families, and the community at large.

This submission is authorised by TWU State Secretary, Richard Olsen.

2 Introduction

The TWU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the 'Inquiry into Electric Buses in Regional and Metropolitan Public Transport Networks in NSW' (**Inquiry**).

As the representative of bus drivers working in the private bus industry in New South Wales, the TWU makes this brief submission on behalf of over 3,500 of its members who drive buses on private and government contracts covering the Sydney Metropolitan and outer Sydney regions, and rural and regional areas of the State.

This submission will briefly address paragraphs 2, 5 and 7 of the Inquiry's terms of reference

3 Driver and Public Safety

The TWU is supportive of all initiatives aimed at making the bus industry safer for its members, their families, and the public and communities they live in. Provided our members retain access to decent work and working conditions in the process, the TWU also appreciates the need to, and generally supports movements aimed at, achieving a cleaner and healthier environment.

To this end, the TWU is generally supportive of moves to reduce emissions by moving towards an electric bus fleet. The TWU will make some general comments on the ability of the network to power an entirely electric bus fleet and whether or not a move to an electric bus fleet will truly result in a net emissions reduction below. However, the key issue for the TWU's members in considering a move to an electric bus fleet in New South Wales, and the issue which will be addressed presently, is undoubtedly the impacts such a move is likely to have on safety – both for bus drivers and the general public.

The TWU's members already regularly report difficulties faced by often inattentive pedestrians and other road users, distracted by their smart devices and unaware of their surroundings. This issue is particularly acute in Metropolitan areas, with drivers already under pressure to be hyper-vigilant at all times.

However, this problem would be exacerbated by the introduction of electric buses due to those buses being near silent (if left unmodified). Other road users, vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians will be less aware of the presence of electric buses near them, and there is real concern that the incidence of accidents and safety incidents involving pedestrians may increase should the entire fleet be electrified. This potential danger is particularly concerning for blind and partially sighted pedestrians. These issues and concerns about these issues will in turn increase pressures on drivers.

This is of significant concern to the TWU's bus driver members, particularly in the context where bus drivers are already under a lot of pressure to run to unachievable timetables, with inadequately resourced routes putting them under pressure to drive unsafely. Many drivers do not feel that they are provided adequate rest breaks, and almost all of them worry that this is putting themselves and their passengers at risk. A lot of these problems relate to the competitive tendering processes engaged in by the New South Wales Government. The Government, in these processes, shows little to no regard for the conditions of drivers or matters related to safety. Rather, the competitive tendering process more often than not involves a race to the bottom, resulting in contractors under-pricing contracts or committing to unrealistic and unreasonable KPIs. These unreasonable expectations are ultimately lumped at the feet of drivers.

In addition to these pressures, the majority of bus drivers also face regular verbal abuse, and many have been physically threatened by passengers in the course of performing their work.

These matters are concerning enough on their own, and should be addressed.

However, the prospect of adding further stressors to the job performed by bus drivers by asking them to assume the extra safety responsibilities associated with driving silent buses is deeply concerning.

This issue has already been highlighted with the introduction of other electric vehicles, for example, the recent introduction of the light rail in Sydney from Circular Quay to Randwick. There have been many reports of incidents resulting from a lack of vehicle and pedestrian awareness of these electric vehicles.¹ The TWU is of the view that similar issues are not only likely to arise should the bus fleet be electrified, but to arise much more often and possibly with much graver consequences, given that whereas the light rail operates on a designated route on a fixed part of the roadway, buses are required to manoeuvre in and out of traffic and between lanes, and to share the road with other buses, cars, light and heavy commercial vehicles and bicycles. It should be borne front of mind that if the entire fleet of buses are electrified in New South Wales, these buses will then be operating on all route and school services under a New South Wales Government contract.

At present, the TWU is aware that drivers driving the small number of electric buses currently on trial in the New South Wales fleet are required to activate a horn or bell-like warning to alert other road users of their presence. This extra effort for drivers means more distractions to the driver, and increases the chance of incidents occurring.

¹ See, for example, <https://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/news/shocking-number-of-nearmisses-on-sydneys-new-light-rail-revealed/news-story/7992f2cf95b63a0a39f2658ef7052909>.

The TWU is of the view that rather than requiring a driver to activate a sound on every occasion he or she perceives that a road user needs to be alerted to their presence – a practice which is entirely fallible and simply too risky, and which lumps all responsibility at the feet of a driver who already has to juggle many responsibilities when operating a bus – all electrified buses should and *must* be fitted with devices which allow appropriate sounds at appropriate volumes to play as a constant at all times the bus is in operation.

The determination of the appropriate sound and the volume of the same should be done by testing and in consultation with appropriate stakeholders including the TWU (as the representative of bus drivers in the private industry), industry operators, Transport for NSW, and representatives of motoring, cycling, pedestrian and disability groups.

The TWU's view is that the sound adopted should be a familiar one, so as to cause the least amount of confusion and minimise the risk of incidents and accidents. This is particularly important for the benefit and protection of people in the community with vision impairment issues, but indeed for all members of the community.²

In the TWU's view, the sound of conventional buses should be adopted, and these sounds should be audible at all times an electric bus is in operation.

4 Energy Requirements and Experience with Introducing Electric Bus fleets in other Jurisdictions

Whilst, as noted, the TWU is generally supportive of the idea of introducing electric buses across the New South Wales Government run fleet, in order to make the costs associated with implementing this change and the actions which will need to be taken to address the serious safety considerations associated with such a transition worthwhile, the environmental benefits, in our view, must be real and significant.

It appears clear that, as it stands, the New South Wales network of power generation and distribution would not have the capacity to power a fleet of electric buses to cover the Sydney Metropolitan region, let alone the entire State. The costs and space considerations associated with constructing Depot-based charging stations are significant enough. However, the costs involved in upgrading grids, rethinking how systems are wired, and potentially even building new substations could be staggering. It is not clear how much thought the Government has put in to these practicalities, or how it may propose to deal with the issues associated with charging and powering an entire electrified bus fleet across New South Wales. Whatever plans the Government proposes in this respect need to be clear and considered.³

Further to the practicalities, however, the question also needs to be asked whether a move to an electric bus fleet is likely to achieve an actual net reduction in emissions. It is one thing to have buses emitting zero emissions with no particulate creation, but it is another altogether to say that

² See, for example, as discussed in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/01/futuristic-sounds-to-make-electric-buses-safer-hit-wrong-note>.

³ See, for example, as discussed in <https://www.wired.com/story/electric-buses-havent-taken-over-world/>.

the powering of electric buses is zero emissions. Zero emissions should take into consideration the entire grid or network powering the electric bus fleet, not just the emissions the bus emits whilst in operation. Unless the buses are powered by renewable energy, the benefits of being electrified will, in our view, be vastly outweighed by the costs and safety considerations which come with them.⁴

Before spending a cent of taxpayers' money investing in a wholesale transition to electric buses across New South Wales, the Government *must* consider and address these issues. Complete transparency with the New South Wales public is *essential* in this respect.

5 Conclusion

The TWU commends the Committee for this Inquiry, and is thankful for the opportunity to contribute thereto.

The TWU would welcome an opportunity to appear before the Committee at the public hearing of this Inquiry to expand on the matters outlined in this submission.

20 December 2019
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⁴ See, for example, as discussed in <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/transport/what-we-do/electric-mobility/electric-buses>.