

Japan: striking bus drivers in Okayama refuse to collect fares

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Most strikes by public transport workers follow a similar pattern - the workers protest, the government accuses them of betraying the public, the public sides with the government. In Okayama, Japan, bus drivers are using a different strategy. They continue plying their routes except they do not take money from the public. This strategy has been tried in Australia and various times in the US, beginning in 1944.

TOKYO - Bus drivers in Okayama working with Ryobi Group have taken to the streets in an unusual form of protest. While technically on strike, they are continuing to drive their routes while refusing to take fares from passengers.



A new rival bus line Megurin began operating on April 27 with some routes overlapping those of Ryobi and offering a cheaper fare. If that all wasn't bad enough, Megurin buses have cute little faces too.

As a result, Ryobi drivers are feeling threatened and are asking management for improvements to their job security under the added competition. It would seem Ryobi was less than enthusiastic to accommodate and a strike was declared.

In cases such as this, management may use the labor stoppage against the drivers, appealing to the public that they are putting their own needs before the community's. So to show that isn't the case, Ryobi drivers are continuing to clock in, but without performing the part of their job that requires them to accept payment during certain times. In other words, free bus rides for all!

This isn't the first time such a strike has occurred in Japan or around the world. Both Brisbane and Sydney held fare-free days as part of labor disputes last year. The earliest documented case of a "fare strike" goes back a protest by Cleveland streetcar workers in 1944, and similar cases involving other services have happened in Europe and Latin America prior to that.

Readers of the news were somewhat divided about the concept, with many wondering if it was really in the workers' best interests.

"This isn't good at all. They're working for free?!"

"I think stopping the buses altogether would put more pressure on management."

"The idea is neat, but I think the money saved from wages and the value of free advertisement this action is creating means the company is still doing okay."

"This is a great idea, I like that they are trying different ways to get what they want."

"How cool is that?"

"I heard they do this in Australia and it worked out really well!"

"I think it is a good way to protect the company image in the long run, but I wonder how this affects both sides' bargaining positions."

There are a lot of factors that will affect the outcome of this labor dispute, but it is an interesting experiment to see how such a strike will work in Japanese business culture among management, workers, and passengers.

Considering that Ryobi drivers are looking for job security while up against a cheaper bus company, protecting their image and relationship with their passengers is crucial. So it probably is a wise move for everyone involved.

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