

Wellington rail workers voting on strike action

Our correspondent
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Nearly 400 rail workers in Wellington, New Zealand, are currently voting on whether to take industrial action after they unanimously rejected a proposed collective agreement last month that would have cut their pay.

Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (HR), the multinational companies that run the Greater Wellington Regional Council's (GWRC) commuter rail network, offered a three-year deal with 5 percent for Transdev workers and 4 percent for HR workers in the first year, followed by two years of inflation adjustments—well below the actual increase in living costs. The companies also demanded cuts to retiree payouts, restrictions on sick leave and no back-pay to July, when the workers' previous agreement expired.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on workers to vote “yes” in the strike ballot, which runs until September 12. But the SEG warns that no confidence can be placed in the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU), which is working closely with management to devise another sellout agreement.

The RMTU's ballot proposes an indefinite ban on overtime and shift alterations (including changes to start and finish times) beginning on September 17. In addition, the union leadership would have the ability to call one or more days of strike action, with notice given to management.

Workers are prepared to fight. There is widespread anger over soaring living costs and years of virtually frozen wages, as well as staff shortages, the rundown state of the railways and unsafe conditions.

The RMTU, however, has no intention of leading a sustained struggle against the companies and the GWRC, which are intent on slashing costs and boosting profits. The union has functioned for decades not as a workers' organisation but as an enforcement agency for the government and big business.

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There has been no media reporting on the Wellington rail workers' dispute. The RMTU has not issued a statement on the rejection of the wage-cutting offer or the strike ballot. This silence is part of the union's strategy to isolate rail workers from the rest of the working class, in order to wear them down and demoralise them.

Even if workers vote to strike, there is no guarantee that action will be taken. The RMTU and management issued a joint statement on September 5 declaring that they would discuss three new offers—all similar to the one workers have rejected—on September 10 and “both parties have agreed to attend mediation ahead of any industrial action.”

In December 2021 the RMTU cancelled a national strike that had been voted for by more than 1,400 KiwiRail workers. The union leadership then presented workers with a sellout deal and declared that the anti-democratic cancellation was necessary to avoid damaging relations with the employer.

The last strike by Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (HR) workers in Wellington took place on November 16, 2017, after workers rejected a 1.3 percent wage offer. It was limited to 24 hours and the RMTU cancelled a second strike after HR withdrew its demand for reduced after-hours pay penalty rates for maintenance workers. This was falsely presented as a “victory” by the union and the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation. In fact, the final deal rammed through by the union in April 2018 increased pay by just 2 percent, an effective wage freeze.

If matters are left in the hands of the RMTU, workers will be defeated again. If the union leadership feels compelled to call industrial action, it will be limited and designed to let off steam, while keeping rail

workers divided from the rest of the working class to create the conditions for another sellout.

To carry out a real struggle against attacks on wages and conditions, including the broadest possible strike action, workers must take matters into their own hands.

The SEG calls on workers to build a rank-and-file committee, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the union and the capitalist parties, including Labour and the Greens, which lead the GWRC. The council privatised the rail service in July 2016 with the aim of saving \$100 million over a 15-year period. The *Post* reported on August 15 that the council is preparing to increase fares to compensate for declining passenger numbers.

A rank-and-file committee would be a forum for workers to discuss and formulate their own demands, based on what they actually need—not what the company, the GWRC and the RMTU claim is “realistic” or affordable.

The RMTU has not publicly announced any demands because it is not accountable to its members and is preparing to impose a pro-company deal.

At a recent meeting for rail workers the Socialist Equality Group proposed the following demands for discussion by a rank-and-file committee:

- Wage increases of 20-30 percent to cover what has been lost in previous near-inflation or sub-inflation contracts.

- Full staffing of all train services, with at least one on-board staff member (excluding the locomotive engineer) for every two cars.

- Reinstatement of full-time passenger operators and retail staff whose positions have been axed in previous deals between the RMTU and Transdev.

- Better rostering in order to prevent fatigue and ensure workers’ safety.

- A return to social distancing and masking to stop the continual spread of COVID-19, which has infected many workers multiple times.

- An immediate end to the victimisation of individual workers by the employers, and workers’ control over hiring and firing.

- Free public transport for all, funded by taxing the super-rich.

A rank-and-file committee would also seek to unite the struggles of New Zealand and Australian rail workers employed by Transdev, including tram

workers in Sydney who have taken limited industrial action to oppose attempts to cut their wages.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union in Australia and the RMTU in New Zealand are vehemently opposed to any unified international struggle; they promote nationalism to keep workers divided and weak. Transdev and Hyundai Rotem, however, can only be opposed with an international strategy, mobilising workers around the world who are facing the same attacks from these giant multinational companies.

The running down of public transport is part of the brutal austerity agenda being imposed by the National Party-led government, with the support of the unions and the Labour Party. The aim is to reduce taxes and increase profits for the rich, while freeing up public funds to expand the military in preparation to join US-led imperialist wars.

To oppose this agenda, the SEG calls on workers to fight for the socialist reorganisation of society. This includes placing the rail industry in public ownership, under the democratic control of the working class; ending military spending; and using the fortunes accumulated by the financial elite to build schools, hospitals, houses for all, and to vastly expand public transport and other vital services.



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