

Rail workers vote to strike in Wellington, New Zealand

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Last week, workers employed by Transdev and Hyundai Rotem on Wellington's commuter rail network voted 99 percent in favour of industrial action, with 390 votes for and only 4 against.

The result comes after workers last month unanimously rejected a pay offer from the two companies, which are contracted by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) to operate the New Zealand capital's rail services.

The employers proposed a three-year deal which would have reduced workers' pay relative to the cost of living. Transdev and Hyundai Rotem also wanted to cut back long-standing benefits including payments for retiring workers and sick leave entitlements. The companies refused to offer backpay to July when the previous collective agreement expired.

Both multinational companies are immensely profitable but attempted to justify the cuts by pointing to increased cost pressures. In fact, they are seeking to ratchet up the exploitation of rail workers in order to extract greater profits from the increasingly run-down system, which should be a publicly-owned service.

The ballot result demonstrates that workers are determined to fight back following years of pay freezes, staff reductions and deteriorating working conditions.

The Socialist Equality Group warns, however, that despite the overwhelming mandate for strike action, the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) will do everything possible to either call it off or to minimise its impact. The union has a record of cancelling strikes in violation of the democratic will of its members and pushing through sellout agreements. It has not organised a strike in Wellington since a 24-hour stoppage in 2017. The union then cancelled a second planned strike and eventually pushed through a deal that increased pay by just 2 percent.

The ballot itself did not specify any strike date, but called for an overtime ban and stated that the RMTU would be able to call a strike if it chooses to do so, with notice given to management. Even as voting was underway, the RMTU, Transdev and Hyundai Rotem sent workers a joint letter pledging to "attend mediation ahead of any industrial action."

An overtime ban, as well as a ban on shift alterations, is due to start tomorrow. The GWRC agency Metlink has warned commuters to prepare for nine days of potential disruption and delays, with mediation between the union and the companies scheduled to resume on September 26.

The RMTU has still not issued a public statement on the dispute.

In a letter to staff, Transdev Wellington managing director Ian Ladd said the union had "decided to proceed with industrial action despite what we had understood to be our mutual agreement to attend mediation before taking such steps." He falsely stated that Transdev had "revised and enhanced our offers based on ongoing discussions" since the pay talks began in July. In fact, Transdev and Hyundai Rotem presented three modified pay offers on September 5, none of which represented any real improvement on the one that workers have rejected.

Meanwhile the GWRC, which is run by Labour Party and Green Party councillors, is foreshadowing major cutbacks across its public transport network, including railways.

The council announced on September 11 that funding cuts by the National Party-led government had led to a \$134 million shortfall over the next three years. More than 40 of the GWRC's transport infrastructure projects had their funding declined.

GWRC chair Daran Ponter told the *Post* the council

was considering “some tough and unpopular decisions which will be felt by communities across our region.” The newspaper said this could include “reducing school and ferry services, rationalising high cost and low usage routes, route duplications on road and rail and further increasing of fares.”

According to the *Post*, plans for additional train services could be scrapped, as well as new “bus shelters, toilets for bus drivers, train station seismic strengthening” and upgrades to make public transport more accessible for passengers with disabilities.

The union bureaucracy is preventing any organised opposition to these cuts and other brutal austerity measures that the ruling elite is imposing in response to an historic crisis of capitalism. Already, New Zealand’s unions have accepted thousands of job cuts across the public service, including in the drastically underfunded healthcare sector.

The unions are not workers’ organisations: they are staffed by a privileged bureaucracy with close ties to the Labour Party and big business which has acted for decades to enforce mass redundancies, privatisations and other attacks to boost corporate profits at workers’ expense.

As it has done in the past, the RMTU will point to reduced public transport funding and the “tough” economic environment in order to persuade workers that they have no alternative but to accept a rotten agreement that attacks their pay and working conditions. This is why the RMTU has not announced any actual demands and is remaining silent on the dispute.

To wear down rail workers’ resistance, the union is seeking to isolate them from the rest of the working class—including bus drivers and other transport workers in Wellington, Auckland and other centres, who are all facing the same attacks. The RMTU and its Australian counterpart, the Rail Tram and Bus Industry Union, have also sought to divide Transdev workers in Wellington from those in the Sydney tram network, who recently took industrial action to oppose attempts to cut their wages.

This situation underscores the urgent need for workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the RMTU by building an independent rank-and-file committee controlled by workers themselves.

Such an organisation will enable workers to discuss

demands that actually address their needs—not the profit-driven requirements of the government, the council and their corporate masters. Against the RMTU’s efforts to limit industrial action and prevent an effective strike, a rank-and-file committee would fight for the broadest possible strike action, uniting with other transport workers in both New Zealand and Australia.

Rail workers should adopt a socialist perspective based on the recognition that they are in a struggle not just against individual employers and politicians, but against the capitalist system itself. The demand must be raised for public ownership of all rail and bus networks, with billions of dollars invested to provide high-paying jobs, reliable services and low fares. All this can be paid for by redirecting funds from the coffers of the super-rich and ending military spending to prepare for war.

We urge workers who agree with this perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Group.



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