

Union calls off Wellington, New Zealand rail workers' industrial action

Our correspondents
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On September 23 the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) announced that it was calling off limited industrial action by more than 400 workers on the Wellington, New Zealand rail network.

The RMTU leaders cancelled the work-to-rule action—an overtime ban, a ban on shift alterations, and strict adherence to breaks—after just one week. Union officials and representatives of Transdev and Hyundai Rotem, who operate the trains on behalf of the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), reached a tentative agreement following an 11-hour meeting last Friday.

Rail workers had voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action; they were not allowed to vote on ending it. Many workers learned about the RMTU's decision from media reports. Details of a new proposed agreement between the union bureaucracy and management will be revealed to workers at a meeting on September 26.

Last month workers unanimously rejected an initial three-year pay offer, which limited pay increases to 4 or 5 percent in the first year, then froze wages at the rate of inflation for the next two years. The companies refused to offer backpay to July, when the previous collective agreement expired, and demanded cuts to long-standing conditions including payments for retiring workers and workers who could no longer work due to injury or illness.

The work-to-rule, which resulted in dozens of train services being cancelled, was shut down following significant pressure from Transdev. In an attempt to derail the action, management issued a notice to workers saying: "You have a choice if you wish to participate in industrial action. You may still wish to accept overtime."

Transdev Wellington managing director Ian Ladd

falsely told a GWRC meeting on September 19 that the disruption to services was "being caused by union members taking longer breaks than what they are entitled to, at times when they are meant to be running trains."

RMTU organiser Todd Valster told Radio NZ: "They're working to their rosters, they're working to their employment agreement, they're working to their legislation and if it falls over because they're complying to those three things, then the work's poorly arranged."

In fact, the cancellation of so many services—26 trains were cancelled on September 20 alone—demonstrates that the system is severely understaffed. It is also an indictment of the RMTU, which has for years accepted a rostering regime that relies on workers doing large amounts of overtime and regularly skipping breaks to which they are legally entitled.

GWRC transport committee leader Thomas Nash, a member of the Green Party, postured as a supporter of rail workers, telling RNZ: "If you've got a model that relies on workers not actually being able to take their breaks as scheduled for the model to work then that model may need to be adjusted."

Fellow Greens councillor Yadana Saw also said questions had to be asked, including "is [the rail system] funded enough, are the workers getting their time adequately recompensed?"

The GWRC, which is led by Labour and Green members, has criticised the National Party-led government's cuts to public transport funding, which has resulted in numerous upgrades to rail and bus networks being delayed or cancelled.

All of this is deeply hypocritical. The GWRC privatised the delivery of rail services in 2016. Its initial agreement with the multinational companies

Transdev and Hyundai Rotem demanded cost savings of \$100 million over 10 years, achieved through intensified exploitation of workers.

Both multinational companies are making significant profits. Despite its claims to be facing “cost pressures,” in 2023 Transdev internationally made €9.3 billion (NZ\$16.6 billion) in revenue, up 21 percent compared with 2022. Hyundai Rotem made an operating profit of 210 billion South Korean won last year (about NZ\$250 million).

The 2017-2023 Labour Party-Greens government made false promises to reform public transport and increase workers’ wages. It did nothing to address the long-term decay of the rail network or the profiteering by private companies from what should be a public service. The RMTU, meanwhile, repeatedly donated tens of thousands of dollars to Labour and the Greens in support of their election campaigns.

The RMTU is keeping quiet about the new offer ahead of Thursday’s meeting, other than telling the media it is above the rate of inflation and that the companies have withdrawn some of the attacks on conditions. Workers should have no confidence in such statements and should demand to see all details of the proposed deal.

The inflation rate of 3.3 percent in the 12 months to June is much less than the official increase in household living costs, up 5.4 percent in the same period. To make up for what they have lost from decades of near-frozen wages, workers would need an increase of 20 percent, at least.

The RMTU’s anti-democratic decision to cancel industrial action before workers had an opportunity to discuss the revised offer is entirely in keeping with its record. For decades it has functioned, not as a workers’ organisation, but as an enforcement agency for the government, the council and private corporations which have gutted public transport for profit.

The union bureaucracy has repeatedly cancelled strikes and then forced through wage cuts or freezes, telling workers they have no hope of achieving a better deal. In the present dispute the union leadership has kept workers isolated from others in the transport industry who are facing similar attacks, including Transdev workers in Sydney’s tram network who have taken industrial action after rejecting an offer that would have reduced their real wages.

To oppose another sellout, workers need to take the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucrats by organising a rank-and-file committee, independent of the RMTU. This will provide a forum for workers to discuss and formulate demands that meet their needs, not the profit-driven imperatives of the council and the corporations.

Such an organisation would fight to mobilise the tens of thousands of workers employed throughout the world by Transdev and Hyundai Rotem, in opposition to the nationalist divisions promoted by the unions. It would also seek to forge links with other transport workers in Wellington, Auckland and across the country who are coming under attack due to the government-council austerity program.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on rail workers to adopt a socialist perspective, which includes the demand for public ownership of transport services, under the democratic control of the working class. These services should be significantly expanded, with more and high-paying jobs, funded by stopping spending for militarism and war and by redirecting the enormous wealth accumulated by the super-rich.



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