

# New Zealand: Job cuts planned for Auckland rail services

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Up to 300 Auckland rail workers face losing their jobs in a restructure of train services in New Zealand's largest city. They include at least 160 on-board train managers, who could be axed in favour of 18 officers who will monitor automated electronic ticket gates, the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) told Newstalk ZB on June 29.

Auckland Transport (AT) is still negotiating the plan with the trade union and private contractor Transdev. AT refused to confirm the job cuts but told Newstalk ZB "some services could operate just with a driver."

The Land Transport Amendment Bill, expected to pass parliament next month with support from Labour and the Greens, will give officers at ticket gates more legal powers, including to issue penalty notices to fare evaders.

Councils throughout the country are enforcing the National Party government's 2013 "public transport operating model" to increase profits and promote privatisation to slash costs at the expense of workers' wages, jobs and conditions. This is in line with similar assaults on transport workers internationally. Earlier this month, rail workers across Britain struck against the imposition of Driver Only Operated trains.

In a press statement on June 30, AT spokesman Brendon Main claimed the proposed changes would "make the trip safer." The removal of onboard staff will, in fact, make train journeys less safe. The plans are clearly intended to reduce spending and boost profits.

Transdev, a French-based multinational corporation, reported global revenues of €6.7 billion (\$NZ10.5 billion) in 2016, largely achieved through attacks on its workforce. Transdev and its parent company Veolia cut 140 bus drivers' jobs and wages in Seattle in 2008. In 2015, over 580 ferry workers were made redundant

after Transdev's France-Corsica service SNCM was sold to an entrepreneur. Both moves were supported by the trade unions involved.

Auckland's commuter rail services were privatised in 2004 under the then-Labour Party government and contracted to Connex (later Transdev). Transdev's Auckland operation doubled its profits to \$1.99 million between 2012 and 2013, and again to \$4 million in 2014. Staff are paid little more than the minimum wage, currently \$15.75 an hour.

AT is cutting costs throughout its network. It closed the Westfield station in the working-class suburb of Otahuhu in March, saying the number of passengers using the station dropped below 330 a day.

In fact, there is an urgent need for more train services. Auckland's population is over 1.5 million and grew 2.8 percent last year. According to AT, in the 12 months to March "rail boardings [grew] by over 19 percent."

Despite publicly criticising the planned job cuts, the RMTU is collaborating in the restructure. Negotiations between the union and Transdev began approximately two months ago, and recruitment reportedly has begun for the 18 new officers. The union called a token two-hour stopwork meeting on July 13 in which 150 workers protested against the cuts.

The RMTU's Stuart Johnstone told the WSWs the union did not intend to organise a strike against the cuts because it would be "illegal."

Instead, the union is calling on workers to install a Labour-led government in the September national election. This is despite Auckland's mayor Phil Goff, who is overseeing the attacks on rail workers, being a former Labour Party leader. His council has also axed 194 library jobs, and is considering privatising Ports of Auckland and introducing a user-pays scheme for roads.

Goff was a minister in the 1984–1989 Labour government, championing the regressive Goods and Services Tax and introducing fees for tertiary education.

The Labour Party and the unions are themselves responsible for the draconian anti-strike legislation that the RMTU uses as an excuse to oppose strike action. In 2000, Helen Clark's Labour government passed the Employment Relations Act (ERA), which outlaws most strikes outside contact negotiations. The bill was accepted and promoted by the Council of Trade Unions.

The National Party, which took office in 2008, has seen no reason to overturn the ERA, only amending it in 2008 with a law that allows small businesses to sack workers arbitrarily within a 90-day trial period.

The RMTU has a long record of helping to impose redundancies, including 158 job cuts at the state-owned company KiwiRail in 2012.

In Wellington, New Zealand's capital, the union has worked with Transdev to keep wages down, imposing a 2 percent wage increase, barely above the 1.6 percent rate of inflation in 2016. Last year, the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), led by former Labour and Green MPs, privatised commuter rail services and gave the contract to Transdev, which vowed to cut \$100 million in operating costs over 15 years.

The RMTU has kept Wellington rail workers in the dark about the planned job cuts in Auckland, even though similar attacks are no doubt being prepared for the capital. The GWRC and private company Transit are currently seeking to slash wages for bus drivers.

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Job cuts are sweeping the country, including at the Cadbury chocolate factory in Dunedin (350 redundancies), the Silver Fern Farms meatworks in Ashburton (370), Auckland library (194), Otago University (182) and A&G Price engineering in Thames (100). The Inland Revenue Department confirmed this month it plans to axe at least 1,500 positions over the next three years.

This intensifying assault on the working class by big business and the government is fully supported by the Labour Party and the unions. This underscores the need for workers to break decisively from these

organisations and form new rank-and-file committees to unite workers in transport and other industries, who are seeking to defend their right to decent jobs, wages and conditions.

There is an urgent necessity for a new political party to lead the working class in the fight against capitalism and for the socialist reorganisation of society on a world scale. This includes taking public transport and other essential services out of the hands of corporations and placing them under public ownership and democratic control.

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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