

# New Zealand rail union seeks to renew pay deal with private operator

Our correspondents  
7 August 2017

The New Zealand Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) has begun talks to renew a pro-company pay agreement with French transport company Transdev and its subcontractor, South Korea's Hyundai Rotem. The one-year contract, covering 400 rail workers in the capital city, Wellington, expired last month.

The Labour and Green Party-dominated Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) chose Transdev to operate Wellington's passenger rail service from July 2016, in a bid to save \$NZ100 million over 15 years. The council is currently engaging new bus operators to save millions more at the expense of drivers' wages and conditions (see: "Wellington transport workers face attacks on jobs and conditions").

The RMTU issued a bargaining notice on May 4, but negotiations were initially held up because Transdev wanted an assurance there would be no cancellation of rail services during bargaining. In previous wage negotiations, a small number of off-peak services were targeted by the union so rail workers could attend limited stopwork meetings. Transdev has also insisted on its own right of communication with staff instead of through the union.

The preliminary disagreement was purely for show. RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson last year opposed any full stoppages that would seriously disrupt services. After an unsuccessful meeting with Transdev on July 10, Butson said that a strike ballot would be sent to union members in an attempt to force the company into "real and meaningful bargaining."

Negotiations apparently began on July 25. RMTU delegates have been issuing vague assurances that "good progress" is being made but rail workers have been kept completely in the dark. There has been no discussion with members on the union's log of claims or ratification sought.

A series of staggered two-hour stopwork meetings, permitted under industrial law, have been foreshadowed but the dates are presently unknown. Management and the RMTU are reportedly involved in discussions about how the meetings can be organised to provide minimal or no disruption to train services.

The deliberate and undemocratic withholding of information is another indication that the RMTU has no intention of defending wages, penalty rates, jobs and conditions. The WSWs has been told that at an RMTU meeting in April some train managers and locomotive engineers called for a 15 percent wage increase. RMTU chief Butson, who is a member of the NZ Institute of Directors and holds several directorships, accused the workers of making excessive demands that would require "months of strikes."

In Auckland, the RMTU and Transdev are currently collaborating with the city council to restructure the passenger rail system and cut more than 160 train manager jobs. The union responded with a token stopwork meeting on July 13.

RMTU official Stuart Johnstone told the WSWs last month that the union does not intend to organise any strikes over the cuts because it would be "illegal." The union is instead calling on workers to install a Labour-led government in the September election, despite the fact that Auckland mayor Phil Goff, who is overseeing the attacks, is a former Labour Party leader.

The RMTU has refused to inform rail workers outside Auckland about the cuts, even though similar attacks are undoubtedly being prepared elsewhere, including in the capital. The union's publications, the *Activist* and the *Transport Worker* remain silent on the job cuts. The RMTU has meanwhile donated \$20,000 to the Green Party and \$30,000 to Labour for their respective election campaigns.

Transdev made large savings in Wellington through the 2016 contract. The agreement was jointly sold by the company and union as maintaining the “same or more favourable” wages and conditions as under the previous employer Tranz Metro, a subsidiary of state-owned KiwiRail.

This proved to be a lie. Workers gained a paltry 2 percent wage rise, slightly above the 1.6 percent inflation rate and well below the high cost of living, especially in housing, food and petrol. Ticket “clippies” remain among the country’s lowest paid workers, earning between \$17.62 and \$18.72 an hour, little more than the \$15.75 minimum wage.

The privatisation has meant the continuation of inadequate staffing of trains despite an increase in carriage numbers. An onerous “just-in-time” performance regime has been imposed on train managers. Transdev has employed more part-time “clippies,” while keeping the number of full-time workers to a bare minimum. An intrusive points system now monitors all sick leave. With workplace tensions rising, one Transdev manager berated staff at a meeting earlier this year, saying if they did not want to work, there are “plenty of people on the street” who could replace them.

The RMTU has a history of collaborating with public and private railway owners who have destroyed rail workshops, regional services and closed “unprofitable” branch lines throughout the country. KiwiRail’s predecessor Tranz Rail made record profits in the 1990s as workers suffered cuts to jobs and conditions. KiwiRail’s staff levels are 3,700 today compared with 21,000 in 1982. The union has not opposed the reliance on part-time, casual and split-shift work which threatens full-time permanent employment.

Rail workers need to carefully consider the RMTU’s history of betrayals and mobilise against the union’s attempt to determine the terms and outcome of the 2017 agreement. Last year, the union rammed through a vote in favour of its sell-out agreement with an anti-democratic ballot. Workers who did not return their ballots were counted in the “yes” vote. Those opposed were instructed to mark “x” in a box and return it to the union’s head office.

Workers should oppose all attempts by the union to hose down their claims, prevent access to information on its negotiations and restrict industrial action to

harmless one- or two-hour “stoppages.” These protests are designed to let off steam and wear down workers’ fighting strength while ensuring the union negotiates another cost-cutting pay deal with management.

In New Zealand and internationally, transport workers are heading into struggles against privatisation and other cost-cutting measures. Last month, British rail workers struck against the imposition of Driver Only Operated trains. In every case the ruling elites rely on the trade unions to impose the dictates of international conglomerates and oppose the mobilisation of the working class against capitalism.

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) calls upon rail workers to break with the unions and the Labour Party, establish rank-and-file workplace committees and mobilise with bus workers and other sections of the working class in defence of jobs and for decent wages and working conditions. This must also involve a turn to rail and transport workers internationally and the political struggle for a socialist program and a workers’ government that would put transport under the democratic control and ownership of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**