

New Zealand rail union blocks struggle against attacks on conditions

Our reporters
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The New Zealand Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) called a two-hour stopwork meeting in Wellington on October 4 to discuss its employment contract dispute with French transport company Transdev and South Korea's Hyundai Rotem (THR).

The agreement, covering over 400 workers, is being re-negotiated a year after the rail network was privatised by the Labour and Green Party-controlled Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC).

The RMTU presented the stoppage as a “strike” in response to THR's moves to impose draconian “clawbacks” in the contract. These include penal rate reductions for weekend and night shifts covering 44 maintenance workers, on-board manning cuts, attacks on sick leave and allowances, and a requirement to work public holidays on demand.

RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson highlighted the company's guarantee to workers last year that it would maintain the “same or more favourable terms and conditions” as the previous operator Tranz Metro, part of the state-owned KiwiRail.

This promise—which the RMTU sold to workers—quickly proved to be false. Workers gained a paltry 2 percent wage rise, slightly above the 1.6 percent inflation rate. Most passenger operators remained part-time, on \$17.62 an hour, just above the minimum wage of \$15.75.

In order to shift the blame, Butson told media workers are “very angry a French multinational is coming in and trying to rip terms and conditions off them.” He complained profits would “end up in Paris,” echoing nationalist NZ First Party leader Winston Peters' statements opposing profits going to “large overseas companies” instead of local capitalists.

The RMTU conducted a strike ballot last month intended, according to Butson, to pressure management

into “real and meaningful bargaining.” Workers supported strike action by a 370–21 majority, expressing their determination to defend jobs, conditions and living standards.

What the RMTU carried out, however, was nothing more than an unpaid work stoppage in line with industrial law. The Employment Relations Act, passed by a Labour Party government in 2000 and backed by the Council of Trade Unions, contains sweeping restrictions on the right to strike. It provides for strictly regulated stoppages during bargaining, essentially to give the unions a platform through which they exercise their role as industrial police.

Following discussions with the company, Butson said the union scheduled its “strike” at a time that would cause “minimal disruption.” Described as a “last resort,” it was the first rail stoppage organised by the union leadership in Wellington since 1994. In 2002 there were two unauthorised strikes by workers to protest unfair dismissals.

In reply to an exposure of the RMTU's record by the Socialist Equality Group, Butson contemptuously dismissed what he snidely called “the eternal class struggle.” He declared that “industrial action is merely preparation for building organisations and getting back around the table,” i.e., to negotiate further sellout deals with management.

The RMTU and its predecessors have for decades collaborated with governments and private companies to cut staff, keep wages down and boost corporate profits. The rail workforce has been slashed from 21,000 in 1982 to 3,400.

Cost-cutting has continued following the 2008 global financial crash. In 2012, 90 jobs were lost with the closure of the Hillside rail workshop in Dunedin, and 158 engineering jobs were scrapped. The union assisted

by urging its members to take “voluntary” redundancies.

In September, Butson claimed the RMTU would not “enter into concession bargaining” with THR. However, negotiations have been going on behind closed doors since July without any of the RMTU’s claims previously being voted on by members.

At the October 4 meeting, Butson presented management’s 11 claims, and 12 from the union. Voting was carried out on the voices. By large margins, but with some dissent, workers opposed all employer claims and approved those proposed by the union.

A RMTU resolution calling for unspecified strike action if no settlement was reached in negotiations this week was passed overwhelmingly. The RMTU’s “opposition” to the assault by management, however, is purely pro-forma. The union has no intention of fighting to defend, let alone improve, working conditions and living standards.

The RMTU’s own claims are largely meaningless and represent no advance on the 2016 agreement. They include a “laundry allowance” for uniforms, previously removed under KiwiRail, and minor adjustments to pay scales, allowances and service progression.

There is no specific claim for a pay increase. A document made available to workers last month declared the union was negotiating for “real and meaningful increases in all pay rates and allowances.” This hollow phrase commits the union to nothing and leaves it entirely in the hands of the employer and the union to determine what is “meaningful” and over what period of time.

This claim was not presented or voted on in the meeting. Instead, the RMTU called on THR to “commit to becoming a ‘Living Wage’ employer.” This equally empty formulation refers to a call by several unions to establish an officially-recognised “living wage” at a totally inadequate rate of \$20.20 an hour.

The union’s opposition to putting forward an actual wage increase figure proves that it refuses to be held to account by the membership. In April, Butson dismissed some members’ calls for a 15 percent increase and described THR’s low wages as “reasonable.”

THR has offered a pay increase of 1.3 percent, well below inflation, which is officially running at 1.7 percent. The price of food rose 2.8 percent in the past year, while Wellington rents jumped 10 percent.

The RMTU and Transdev also have been in talks with Auckland City Council, which is led by mayor Phil Goff, a former Labour Party leader, to impose Driver Only Operation (DOO), threatening up to 300 jobs.

The RMTU declared it will launch a “relentless campaign” to keep train managers on-board in the interests of public safety. This promise is worthless.

The union opposes any common industrial and political struggle to defend jobs and conditions. On September 27, the union mounted a “safe trains” demonstration at Britomart station in Auckland. It permitted city councillors to address the protest, promoting the very political parties responsible for the decades-long attacks on rail.

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) says bluntly to workers that the way forward is not through the reactionary, anti-worker trade unions but in a rebellion against them on the basis of a socialist perspective. Worker-run rank-and-file committees must be formed, independent of, and opposed to, the RMTU and the Labour Party, to unite with workers nationally and internationally who are facing similar attacks.

We urge rail workers who are looking for a program on which to fight to defend jobs and living standards to contact the SEG at sep.wellington@gmail.com.

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