

New Zealand: Wellington rail workers hold 24-hour strike

Our reporters

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Over 400 rail workers employed by Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (THR) in New Zealand's capital city, Wellington, held a 24-hour strike on November 16. The strike was called by the NZ Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) after negotiations to renew a union-company Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA), broke down.

Passenger train services on the Kapiti, Hutt Valley, Johnsonville and Masterton lines, which carry 30,000 commuters daily, were cancelled. Train-replacement buses did not run.

The strike called by the union was the first since 1994 to halt the Wellington rail network for longer than two hours, and the first since the new Labour-led government took office earlier this month. It was backed almost unanimously in a secret ballot of RMTU members, an indication of workers' determination to defend their wages and working conditions.

Small pickets involving around 20 workers and union delegates, including some young workers, were held at the Wellington station and by outer-depot workers at Paraparaumu and Upper Hutt stations and at the maintenance depot in Thorndon.

The RMTU called the strike in response to THR's moves to impose draconian "clawbacks" in the new 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.

The MECA is being renegotiated a year after the rail network was privatised by the Labour and Green Party-controlled Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC). Negotiations, which began May 4, broke down after a government mediator failed to break the impasse.

The company last year promised that it would maintain the "same or more favourable terms and conditions" as the previous operator Tranz Metro, part of the state-owned KiwiRail. The undertaking—which the RMTU sold to workers—proved to be false. In 2016, 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.

Underscoring THR's strategy to gut longstanding working conditions, senior manager David Gould told *Newshub* that the company views the current contract as a relic from "the age of steam." Meanwhile, Transdev is moving to introduce a full Driver Only Operation (DOO) in Auckland, the country's major city, threatening up to 300 jobs.

RMTU official Howard Phillips told the WSWWS that THR had "refused to bargain in good faith" and was pursuing its full list of "clawbacks." There had been no progress, Phillips said, over a vague union proposal for a so-called "living wage" of \$20.20 an hour. Transdev had offered a 1.3 percent increase, below the inflation rate and dependent on workers accepting all the company's demands.

RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson told Radio NZ on November 15 that the union had proposed "modest claims" including "real wage growth." When asked "in percentage terms what kind of increase are you talking about?" the union leader claimed he could not "answer that because we can't get the employer to engage on the claim." In fact, the union has not lodged any claim for an across-the-board pay increase.

The RMTU has no perspective of mounting a concerted industrial and political campaign to oppose the company's attacks, let alone improve wages and conditions. While a strike notice remains active until December 1, the strictly limited action taken by the union is designed to pressure the company back to the table for "meaningful" negotiations so that another sell-out deal can be struck.

At the same time, the union is trying to deflect the anger of rail workers, and the wider working class, with bogus nationalist appeals targeting "foreign multinational companies" for threatening the conditions of "New Zealand workers." In a full-page open letter published in Saturday's *Dominion Post*, Butson apologised for any "inconvenience" the strike caused, and declared that if the union accepted the cuts "the only winners would be the foreign owners—with future profits disappearing offshore."

These comments are completely hypocritical. The RMTU and its predecessor unions have for decades collaborated with both Labour and National governments and private companies to cut staff, keep wages down and boost corporate profits. The Wellington rail privatisation was initiated by the GWRC in a bid to save \$100 million over 15 years. The GWRC is now offering Wellington's bus routes to new contractors, who are intent on boosting profits through similar attacks on the pay and conditions of bus drivers.

Butson told Radio NZ he wanted to "get the attention" of the regional mayors represented on the GWRC transport committee and airily promised there will be "accountability at the next local body elections." However, he defends the union's collaboration with both Labour and the Greens, whose recent election campaigns received a total of \$50,000 in donations from the RMTU, which is also a Labour Party affiliate.

Both these parties have sought to cover up their responsibility for the current state of affairs. The Greens' industrial relations spokesperson Jan Logie echoed Butson's statements that workers were "being attacked to increase the profits of multinational companies." Labour transport minister Phil Twyford made the empty promise that it would "invest in more public transport" with "fair wages with good conditions."

In fact, in Auckland, the attack on rail workers' jobs is being carried out under Mayor Phil Goff, a former Labour Party leader.

The Labour-NZ First-Green Party government does not want the dispute to become a rallying point for other workers looking to defend their wages, jobs and conditions. For all the illusions encouraged by the unions, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has already pledged her government's allegiance to big business, including foreshadowing further drastic restrictions on the right to strike.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) warns that the way forward is not through the nationalist, anti-worker trade unions but in a rebellion against them. The basis for this is the fight for a socialist perspective and the building of worker-controlled rank-and-file committees independent of and opposed to the RMTU and the Labour Party.

WSWS reporters spoke with workers picketing the Wellington Railway station.

Jonny, a train manager, said he had been on the job for just over a year. "I love the job. But what I see happening is the company promised all the conditions that were fought for years ago would be kept the same or better." However, in bargaining "they are now trying to take things away, such as penal rates. Also they are refusing to actually bargain. They

just get up and leave the meeting."

Jonny said the main issue was the company's push to reduce on-board staff. "They want to have fewer clippies working larger trains. On some trains it is impossible to supervise as it is. Health and safety is important, and that is under threat. Also they want to force us when to use our days in lieu. As a young person I want to be able save them up and use them when I want. Also they want force us to work statutory holidays. If people with kids don't want to work days, like at Christmas, they shouldn't be forced to."

Asked about the company's plans to introduce a driver-only operation in Auckland, Jonny said; "Yes. We stand very strongly with the Auckland branch. If they do it there they can do it here. Give them an inch and they will take a mile." He agreed there should be combined action called between the Auckland and Wellington workers to fight it. "That would be fantastic," he said.

"I'm loving the solidarity, the way the workers all stick together," Jonny said. "If the company doesn't shift after today there will be more strikes. The thing is it will get harder and harder. There are some members who can't afford to lose more days off work. But will do our best."

Katrina, also a train manager, described the strike as a "last resort." She was "unhappy about many things." Katrina was particularly concerned about the company's attempt to claw back overtime pay. "I haven't done overtime, but other people will be getting a lot less money. People are feeling pretty strongly about it."

Asked about her own conditions, Katrina said the job was "not well paid. With the amount of stuff that we deal with, train managers are not just glorified people that walk up and down a train, they do a lot more than that. Help disabled commuters on and off trains, health and safety, deal with emergencies. I do a lot of shift work. The shifts change every single day." The pay rise being offered by the company was "not enough."

"If they were a good business, they'd see us [workers] as the foundation," Katrina added. "If the company doesn't change its mind, there could be further action. I would be prepared for that."



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