

Continuing attacks on New Zealand public transport workers' jobs and wages

Our reporters

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Auckland Council and private contractor Transdev are continuing negotiations with the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU), which began six months ago, over a proposal to make around 200 on-board train workers redundant. Transdev wants to introduce driver-only operated trains in New Zealand's largest city from mid-2018.

In Wellington, New Zealand's capital, Transdev, its subcontractor Hyundai Rotem and the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) are re-negotiating a collective agreement with the RMTU aimed at further eroding wages and working conditions.

These attacks are occurring under the new Labour Party-led national government and are directed by Labour-aligned councils. This exposes the utter fraud of the RMTU's promotion of Labour as a progressive alternative to the former National Party government.

In the December issue of *Transport Worker*, RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson glorified the new government, declaring that New Zealand is "on the crest of a major political shift" and "it will be a prosperous 2018."

Auckland Mayor Phil Goff, a former Labour Party leader, told Radio NZ on December 8: "I don't think it's helpful for politicians to get involved [in the rail dispute]." Far from being a neutral bystander, Auckland Transport (AT) is working closely with Transdev to sack permanent on-board train crews and replace them with transport officers employed by AT.

Transdev, a multinational company based in France, was contracted by Auckland Council in 2004 and GWRC in December 2015 to deliver millions of dollars in cost savings.

This is part of a broader attack on public services in both cities. Auckland Council has already sacked hundreds of library staff, with the collaboration of the

Public Service Association. According to the *Spinoff*, operations funding for Auckland Art Gallery has been cut from \$9.2 million in 2012 to \$6.9 million last financial year. The council also plans to slash \$373 million over 10 years from its communications, waste and water management services.

The GWRC, chaired by former Labour Party MP Chris Laidlaw, wants to cut spending on bus and train services.

About 500 bus workers in the capital held a half-day strike on November 29 to protest the council's proposed contract with private company Transit, which wants to eliminate drivers' overtime and weekend rates.

Rail workers are also seeking to fight back. In Wellington around 400 workers held a one-day strike on November 16 against proposed wage cuts. This was followed by a 24-hour strike by Auckland rail workers on December 8.

Behind various nationalist denunciations of "foreign-owned" Transdev and Hyundai Rotem, the RMTU is preparing, as it has done numerous times before, to impose pro-business agreements on its members.

The RMTU claims to oppose the destruction of jobs in Auckland on safety grounds but makes clear on its web site that it is willing to accept some cuts and recognises "the inevitability of more autonomous trains."

The union cancelled a second strike in Wellington planned for December 1, after Hyundai Rotem agreed to drop its demand for reductions to after-hours pay penalty rates for 44 maintenance workers. A letter distributed to Wellington RMTU members on December 5 claimed this was a victory. It stated that while no agreement had been reached, the company had "no intention" to reduce wages or "make people

compulsorily redundant.”

This assertion has no credibility. Transdev is threatening hundreds of layoffs in Auckland and if driver-only operation is introduced there, it is likely to be extended to Wellington. The RMTU has kept the disputes in Auckland and Wellington separate, even though most rail workers in both cities are employed by Transdev.

As for wages, the RMTU says it has agreed with Transdev and Hyundai Rotem on a “cost of settlement at or about 2 percent”—the same increase as the pro-company 2016 agreement. This amounts to a wage freeze, while living costs continue to soar.

Currently, in Wellington, the lowest-paid passenger operators receive \$17.62 an hour, just above the minimum wage of \$15.75. Consumer prices nationally rose 1.9 percent in the 12 months to September, according to official statistics. Median rents in Wellington rose 8.7 percent this year, exacerbated by a housing shortage.

The strike action by public transport workers demonstrates their determination to fight back after decades of attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. In response, the pseudo-left groups are working to promote illusions in the unions and the Labour-Greens-New Zealand First coalition government.

Following the Wellington strike last month, the International Socialist Organisation called on “the union movement [and] members of the Labour and Green parties” to demand that the government legislate to stop councils from contracting rail services out to private companies.

The ISO’s November 17 article, however, failed to mention that rail workers are under attack from councils led by Labour politicians. The ISO campaigned for Labour in the election and fraudulently presented its victory as a step forward for workers.

The 1980s Labour government gutted the rail network, transforming it from a public service into a for-profit business. With the assistance of the rail unions, thousands of workers were sacked, paving the way for privatisation and other attacks.

The Socialist Equality Group insists that workers can only defend jobs and conditions in a struggle against the unions, which function as adjuncts of big business and the government. This means building new organisations, rank-and-file committees controlled by

workers themselves, to break out of the isolation imposed by the unions and unite with workers in other industries.

Public transport must be nationalised and placed under democratic control, with billions of dollars to expand services and provide well-paid jobs and free travel.

The problem is not “foreign” companies, as the unions claim, but capitalism itself. Workers in every country face endless redundancies, wage cuts and other attacks. That is why workers must urgently build a new political party, completely opposed to the Labour Party and its apologists, based on a socialist perspective to unite workers internationally and restructure society to meet human need, not private profit for a wealthy elite.



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