

New Zealand: Breakdowns and lack of safety in Wellington's rail network

Our correspondents
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Public transport authorities in New Zealand's capital Wellington are in damage control mode after the fragile and vulnerable state of its privatised passenger train services was exposed in a series of breakdowns in the first two months of 2018.

Repeated outages have brought the rail system to a standstill. In the latest incident, commuters were warned at 9.00 a.m. on Monday that services on the busy Hutt Valley and regional Wairarapa lines would be subject to "significant delays," and others cancelled, due to a signal fault. For workers travelling in from the Wairarapa, it was yet another episode in a decade-long history of unreliable performance on the rail line.

Some 90 percent of the region's residents use public transport, including 149,000 journeys made by bus and train each workday. Transdev, a French-based multinational company, operates the Wellington commuter rail service, along with maintenance subcontractor Hyundai Rotem (THR), on behalf of the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC).

The Labour and Green Party-dominated GWRC privatised the network in 2016, promising tens of millions in savings by slashing costs and, at the same time, improved services. This has proved to be a complete fraud.

On the morning of January 19, a train's pantograph, which sits on top of the multiple-unit and draws power from the overhead lines, became entangled in wires at Linden station, causing power outages throughout the network and service cancellations.

A week later, on January 30, Transdev cancelled all commuter services on the Kapiti, Johnsonville, Melling and Hutt Valley lines for almost five hours following another overhead power fault at Wellington rail station just after 2.30 p.m.

Transdev manager Mike Fenton admitted to Fairfax

Media that the company could only summon 19 replacement buses which was "not a lot to move 5,000 people." The GWRC's transport arm, Metlink, advised those stranded "to seek alternative transport."

Buses have been used for many years to replace train services during scheduled track maintenance and infrastructure replacement, yet no advance planning has taken place. The failure of Transdev to obtain enough buses to transport stranded commuters has been compounded by the privatisation of bus services by the Labour government of 1984–1990.

Transdev and state-owned KiwiRail, which owns and manages rolling stock and infrastructure including tracks, tunnels, bridges, signal systems and overhead power lines, have not offered a serious explanation for the power faults. KiwiRail assets manager Dave Gordon told Fairfax Media that it was most likely, due to the warm weather, that "the wire sagged and got caught in the pantograph."

The overhead lines on the Wellington network are supported by traction poles, some of which have been in place since the 1940s and 1950s. An upgrade, which began in 2014, is only 60 percent complete, with \$98 million added to the repair bill in 2017. Train services passing through the busy junction where the incident occurred have been restricted to 10 km/hr, resulting in even more delays.

In another incident on February 1, passenger trains were cancelled on the Kapiti line as heavy rain and wind caused concerns that erosion could threaten the track on reclaimed land adjacent to Porirua Harbour, north of Wellington. Then, on February 5, Wellington station temporarily lost power to three platforms, with some inbound services having to roll in without power. On February 7, late night services on the Kapiti line were cancelled after a freight train broke down between

two tunnels outside Wellington. Little information was provided to stuck passengers.

Earlier this month, the Transport Accident Investigation Commission released a report stating that passenger trains were at “heightened risk” of collision at Wellington station. Eight tracks merge at the rail junction into two, with no “back-up” safety features. The report was undertaken after a near-miss in May 2016, when a driver missed a red-light stop.

Safety investigator Chris Asbery told the *Dominion Post* on February 4 that only a “handful” of safety improvements had been made since the 1930s to the manual signaling system that controls the junction. KiwiRail has ruled out introducing a European Train Control System because the estimated cost of \$175–\$200 million made it not “warranted in terms of our priorities.”

KiwiRail has been hit by cost-cutting by consecutive Labour and National-led governments, enforced by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) and its predecessors. The unions have for decades collaborated with governments and private companies to run down infrastructure, reduce staff, suppress wages and boost corporate profits. The rail workforce has been slashed from 21,000 in 1982 to just 3,400 (see: “A reply to the RMTU on the anti-working class record of the New Zealand rail unions”).

The ongoing degradation of infrastructure and services is accompanied by mounting attacks on the jobs and conditions of rail workers. In Wellington Transdev, THR and the GWRC are re-negotiating a collective agreement with the RMTU, aimed at further eroding wages and conditions.

Rail workers struck for 24 hours on November 16 to oppose a raft of company clawbacks. The RMTU cancelled a second strike on December 1, having agreed on a pay settlement of 2 percent—the same as a pro-company 2016 agreement. Under conditions of soaring living costs, this amounts to a wage freeze. The lowest-paid passenger operators receive \$17.62 an hour, just above the minimum wage of \$15.75. The dispute presently remains unsettled.

Meanwhile, the Auckland Council and Transdev have been negotiating with the RMTU for six months over a proposal to introduce driver-only operated trains and eliminate around 200 on-board jobs. Auckland rail workers held a 24-hour strike on December 8 to oppose

the job cuts. RMTU members were recently balloted over whether to hold another strike, but the union has not yet released the results.

These attacks are occurring under the new Labour Party-led government and directed by Labour-aligned councils, exposing the fraud that Labour would be a “progressive” alternative to the former National Party government.

The New Zealand rail workers’ struggles dovetail with those internationally. In New South Wales, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) confirmed last week that a proposed agreement, hatched in secret by the state government and the union, would facilitate job cuts. The RTBU is doing everything it can to strike a sell-out deal that will intensify the assault on rail workers’ conditions and accelerate privatisation measures.



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