

Australian and New Zealand transport workers must unite their struggles

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
28 February 2018

Thousands of rail and bus workers in New Zealand and Australia are threatened with job losses, wage cuts and attacks on their working conditions.

In New South Wales, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) is seeking to impose an Enterprise Agreement on rail workers across Sydney and NSW that would effectively freeze wages and axe an unspecified number of jobs.

In New Zealand about 200 onboard train managers could be made redundant in a plan by Auckland Transport and private company Transdev to introduce Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains. In Wellington, commuter rail workers also employed by Transdev, under contract from the Greater Wellington Regional Council, are facing a determined attempt to drive down their wages.

Bus drivers in the NZ capital are likewise facing pay cuts when a new employer, Tranzit, takes over the council contract in July from current operator NZ Bus.

Workers in both countries are seeking a way to fight back against these pro-corporate attacks. The entire working class is confronting soaring living costs, stagnant wages repeated rounds of layoffs, privatisations and other attacks in the wake of the global financial crisis.

However, workers face not only the combined power of the state and big business, but also the trade unions, which are working to suppress any resistance, isolate and demoralise workers, and impose sellout agreements.

In opposition to the unions, the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) and Socialist Equality Party (Australia) are fighting to arm the emerging movement of transport workers with a socialist and internationalist perspective. To defend their jobs and conditions, workers must establish new independent organisations, that they control, and unite across borders.

The struggles of Australian and New Zealand transport workers are objectively interconnected. Pro-business restructuring by successive New Zealand Labour and

National Party-led governments has been mirrored in the Australian transport sector. Often the attacks have been carried out in both countries by the same bureaucrats and private companies.

The 1984–1990 New Zealand Labour government of Prime Minister David Lange turned the rail service into a profit-making business in preparation for privatisation. This was part of a far-reaching agenda of pro-market deregulation, which resulted in soaring living costs and mass redundancies.

In May 1989, NZ Railways CEO Kevin Hyde addressed a World Rail Conference in London, outlining how NZR had cut staff numbers by 55 percent—almost 10,000—over five years and transformed from a protected public service into a commercial business. Hyde stressed the critical role of the rail unions, which supported the Labour government and accepted the redundancies.

Also at the conference was New South Wales State Rail Authority CEO Ross Sayers, who had been CEO at NZR before Hyde, from 1986 to 1988. He oversaw same brutal cost-cutting in NSW. In July 1989 the state Liberal Party government demanded that staff on country rail operations be slashed from 18,000 to 10,000. During the 1990s and 2000s several rail lines were shut down, maintenance services were outsourced and jobs axed, under Liberal and Labor governments alike.

New Zealand Rail was sold in 1993 to local and US-based investment bankers. In 2003 the then-Labour government arranged the sale of the network to Australian transport company Toll Holdings, which cut hundreds more jobs and ran down the network, until it was finally bought back by the government in 2008, mainly in order to bail out Toll.

Now even deeper attacks are being prepared on both sides of the Tasman Sea to drive down costs and maximise profits. Workers seeking to oppose this onslaught must draw the lessons from decades of bitter

experiences with Labour and the unions.

Analysing the defeats inflicted on the working class internationally during the 1980s, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, drew attention to the profound political implications of the globalisation of production. The global mobility of capital and the development of transnational corporations facilitated attacks on wages and conditions. But these developments also strengthened the objective unity of the international working class.

The ICFI explained: “It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only as to form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the *form* of the class struggle must assume an international character. Even the most elemental struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on an international scale” (Perspectives Resolution of the ICFI, August 1988).

The trade unions were organically hostile to this perspective. These organisations, rooted in the capitalist nation-state, were incapable of responding in a progressive manner to the globalisation of production. The Labour Party’s former program of limited reforms within protected national economies was no longer viable.

The unions transformed from defensive workers’ organisations into the enforcers of factory closures, mass redundancies, privatisation and wage cuts. Today they function as instruments of big business and the state to police workers and compel them to “sacrifice” for the national economy. Workers in different countries are pitted against one another in a never-ending contest to lower wages and conditions.

The RTBU and RMTU have remained silent about the disputes underway on the opposite side of the Tasman Sea. Both unions are desperate to prevent a unified movement of transport workers, which they fear could become a focal point for growing anti-capitalist sentiment, fuelled by record levels of inequality.

In New Zealand, the RMTU is promoting illusions in the recently-installed Labour Party government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, despite Labour’s long record of attacks. The demands for cost cutting at the Auckland and Wellington rail services come from councils led by former Labour Party MPs.

In New South Wales, the RTBU enforced an order by the government’s Fair Work Commission to cancel a strike planned for January 29, which had been

overwhelmingly voted for by members. It is now seeking to push through a new contract that includes job cuts.

The SEP, the Australian section of the ICFI, and the SEG, which is fighting to build a section in New Zealand, call on workers to rebel against the pro-capitalist trade unions and the Labour Parties.

Workers must demand to see the full details of the sellout agreements being negotiated behind the backs of workers by the union bureaucracy, government officials and corporate management. Mass meetings must be held in Australia and New Zealand to discuss a joint fight to defend jobs, wages and conditions in both countries.

To carry out this fight, workers need to build workplace committees that they control democratically, independent from the trade unions and the political establishment. These committees will link the struggles of rail, bus and other workers internationally.

Such a struggle can only succeed to the extent that it is consciously guided by a socialist program. All claims that there is “no money” for decent public transport services and well-paid jobs must be rejected. The billions of dollars wasted to prepare the Australian and New Zealand militaries for war should be immediately redirected to social services. Major industries, including transport, must be fully nationalised and transformed into public services under the control of the working class. Workers’ governments are needed to refashion society from top to bottom to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not profit requirements of wealthy few.

We urge transport workers who want to discuss this program to contact the SEP and the SEG.



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