

New Zealand: Reject the union sellout of Wellington rail workers!

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
16 March 2018

The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) will hold small group meetings with rail workers in Wellington tomorrow to promote an employment agreement with Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (THR), the private companies that run the capital's commuter rail network on behalf of the Greater Wellington Regional Council.

Led by Labour Party and Green Party-aligned politicians, the council privatised passenger rail services in 2016, aiming to save \$100 million over 15 years. This is to be achieved through job cuts, an effective wage freeze, increased workloads and other attacks on workers, with the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy.

The proposed Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA), covering around 400 workers, follows protracted backroom negotiations between the RMTU, the council and THR, which began in May 2017. The RMTU held a token one-day strike in Wellington last November, in an effort to contain workers' anger over company demands for a pay increase of just 1.3 percent and cuts to weekend penalty rates for Hyundai Rotem workers. The latter threat was subsequently dropped.

The new proposal, fraudulently presented as a victory by the RMTU, is a sellout that workers must decisively reject.

The full draft MECA has not been distributed to workers. Instead, RMTU officials pinned several pages to a staff bulletin board, purportedly displaying all the changes.

The pact includes a pay increase of just 2 percent, the same as in 2016 and not nearly enough to keep pace with soaring living costs. One worker told the WSW the increase amounted to "45 cents an hour that gets eaten up by inflation." The lowest-paid workers, who make \$17.62 an hour, just above the \$15.75 minimum

wage, would only receive an extra 35 cents.

In the 12 months to December 2017, official inflation was 1.6 percent, the price of food increased 2.3 percent and utilities went up 3 percent. A housing shortage, combined with rampant speculation, has driven median rents in Wellington to a record \$550 per week, up from \$480 a year ago, according to property-listing website Trade Me.

The deal also paves the way for job cuts. The RMTU agreed that provisions regarding on-board staffing levels "will be removed from the MECA" and that the union and THR will "work together to reach consensus on on-board staffing levels... with the assistance of an external agreed facilitator."

The document misleadingly states: "There is no intention to reduce pay or conditions or to make employees compulsorily redundant as a result of any changes to on-board train staffing levels."

For decades the RMTU and its predecessors have pressured workers to accept "voluntary" redundancies—with the threat that if they do not, they will be sacked anyway—to assist the government and big business to slash costs and maximise profits. In this way, the rail unions helped the 1984–1990 Labour Party government cut tens of thousands of jobs to prepare the country's rail network for privatisation.

In Auckland, Transdev and the Labour Party-controlled city council are currently demanding around 200 job cuts and the introduction of driver-only operated (DOO) trains. The RMTU claimed to oppose the cuts, but on March 5 the union called off limited industrial action (an overtime ban) and released a joint statement with Transdev announcing that a proposed collective agreement had been reached.

The RMTU agreed to "work constructively and cooperatively" with Transdev and Auckland Council to

resolve the outstanding issue of DOO. The union has not released any details of the proposed agreement.

The RMTU has refused to unite the struggles in Auckland and Wellington, despite the fact that both involve Transdev and Labour Party-run councils, and, if DOO is introduced in Auckland, it inevitably will be brought to Wellington. The WSWS understands that management has already told Wellington workers it intends to cut staff in the next two years by introducing automated ticketing systems.

The union also has rejected any unity with Wellington bus drivers, who face the threat of wage and job cuts in July, when a new employer, Tranzit, takes over a large part of the Wellington council's contract from current operator NZ Bus.

The union is organically hostile to any unified international struggle of New Zealand and Australian rail workers, who are facing similar attacks on their wages and conditions.

The RMTU functions as an adjunct of the government and big business, with a privileged bureaucracy that is completely divorced from the concerns of the working class. The union donated \$50,000 to the Labour and Green Parties last year and has promoted illusions in the Labour-led coalition government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, despite Labour's long record of attacks on rail and other workers.

The RMTU is seeking to ram through the pro-company deal in Wellington with as little discussion as possible among workers. There have been no press statements or comments to the media. Instead of calling a mass stopwork meeting, the union is holding meetings to brief workers on the MECA in small groups, without disrupting operations.

Voting is by postal ballot. When the 2016–2017 MECA was ratified in Wellington, the RMTU received seven votes against the agreement, while every other worker abstained. The union, however, counted all abstentions as votes to accept the deal.

Workers must reject this entire anti-democratic process. Copies of the full proposed MECA must be distributed to every worker. A mass meeting must be held where all workers can collectively discuss the agreement, with ample time allocated for opposing views. A genuinely democratic vote must be taken.

The RMTU's attempt to impose this rotten deal

vindicates the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand). The fight to defend jobs, wages and conditions requires a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy, as well as the Labour Party and its allies.

Workers need new organisations: rank-and-file workplace committees, completely independent of the unions, that they control democratically. These committees will forge links with bus drivers, transport workers in Auckland and Christchurch, and workers in Australia and other countries who are coming into struggle. Workers cannot defeat governments and transnational corporations without a unified international fight.

Above all, workers need a socialist perspective and a party that can lead the fight to abolish the capitalist system and establish workers' governments. Public services such as transport, along with the banks and major industries, must be taken out of private hands and placed under democratic control. Billions of dollars must be diverted from the military and from the fortunes of the super-rich to rebuild rail and other essential infrastructure and create well-paid jobs for all.

We call on rail workers who agree with this perspective to contact the SEG, which is fighting to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in New Zealand.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact