

New Zealand rail union rams through pro-company collective agreement

Our correspondent

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The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) this month pushed through another agreement, covering over 400 rail workers, with transnational transport companies Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (THR), which operate Wellington's commuter rail service.

The RMTU announced the ratification of the Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA), originally meant for renewal in July 2017, in a one-page notice on April 9. It asserted that "97.9 percent of members voted to accept the recommended settlement and the proposed settlement is deemed ratified."

In fact, the RMTU has no mandate to impose the new contract. The ratification is a fraud, achieved through an anti-democratic secret ballot in which unreturned voting papers were shamelessly counted as in favour of the union-company deal. The RMTU issued 380 voting papers by post and reportedly received eight votes against the agreement.

The "vote" was carried out after the union sent text messages to workers that an agreement suddenly had been reached, following months of silence and behind-closed doors negotiations. The RMTU called a solitary 24-hour strike last November to corral workers' anger over a company 1.3 percent wage increase offer and demands for cuts to penalty rates for Hyundai Rotem workers. The union never put in an actual figure for a wage claim.

The "clawback" threat to penalty rates was subsequently dropped, enabling the union to falsely declare a "victory" and call off a second 24-hour strike planned for early December. The RMTU was assisted by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, which declared on February 28 that rail workers had "won after only one day on strike."

In fact the renewed MECA includes a miserly pay increase of 2 percent, backdated to July 2017, the same

as the expired 2016 contract. It is well below the soaring living costs hitting the working class. A union-company Terms of Settlement, accompanying the contract, seeks to deceive workers by stating that THR should "aspire" to become "a living wage employer." This refers to a bogus campaign mounted by some trade unions to establish a minimum "living wage" of \$20.55 an hour.

Most of THR's proposed "clawbacks" have been shelved only temporarily. The union agreed to a change in wording to the "vehicle allowance," when THR requires workers to use their own vehicle for business purposes, and to medical certificates being required for absences of more than five days or in "frequent short illnesses or repeated absenteeism." There are new pay scales for train examiners, engineers, store persons, team leaders and other staff.

The agenda behind the agreement is to pave the way for wage controls, reduced staff, job cuts and redundancies. On April 19, management and union delegates privately advised about a dozen full-time passenger operators that their jobs will be eliminated in July. They were told their role has become "superfluous to the needs of the company" and they will be offered "voluntary" redundancy, part-time passenger operator employment or unspecified "redeployment."

Transdev "staff engagement" meetings between a manager and small groups of workers did not mention this decision. The union-company statement had falsely insisted there was "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."

The document refers to staffing levels on trains as a "challenging issue" to be worked on between the

RMTU, Transdev and an “agreed third party facilitator.” Wellington passenger trains always run understaffed, particularly on busy peak-hour services, saving the company thousands of dollars.

Since the 1984–1990 Labour government began cutting thousands of jobs at NZ Rail, KiwiRail’s 1980s predecessor, in preparation for privatisation, successive governments and operators have relied on the unions to push workers into taking so-called “voluntary” redundancies, or be fired, to slash costs and boost profits.

The Labour and Green Party-dominated Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) privatised the Wellington regional rail service in 2016 through a 15-year deal with THR to save \$100 million at the expense of wages, penal rates and job conditions. The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) warned last month that the renewal of the existing employment contract would mean the continuation of the assault on jobs, wages and conditions, with the collaboration of the RMTU.

This has been entirely vindicated. The GWRC is now seeking to change train timetables in July, and impose a new roster system for locomotive engineers, train managers and other staff. This will mean more train services with shorter breaks between rosters, longer hours and disruptive shift work.

Meanwhile, in Auckland, Transdev and the Labour Party-run city council are demanding around 200 job cuts and the introduction of driver-only operated (DOO) trains. The RMTU claims to oppose DOO-job cuts, but on March 5 the union called off a limited overtime ban and released a joint statement announcing a collective agreement that commits the union to ongoing discussions over staffing. The RMTU has opposed the unification of rail workers’ struggles in Auckland and Wellington, despite the fact that Transdev runs both systems.

The experience of New Zealand rail workers mirrors that of their counterparts in the Australian state of New South Wales. Workers there recently took to social media to condemn an agreement imposed by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union and the Combined Rail Unions, covering around 9,000 train staff.

The Australian unions pushed through the sellout deal in a postal ballot that concluded on March 23. The agreement, which will intensify the assault on workers’

jobs and conditions, was reportedly passed by a razor-thin margin after a months-long campaign by the unions to suppress widespread anger among rail staff.

Rail workers who want to defend their wages, jobs and conditions must launch a rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party by taking the initiative and forming new rank-and-file workplace committees, completely independent of the unions, democratically controlled by the workers themselves. These committees must unite with bus drivers and transport workers throughout New Zealand, Australia and internationally who are coming into struggle.

To defeat capitalist governments and transnational corporations requires an international fight imbued with a socialist perspective and a party that seeks to abolish the capitalist system and establish workers’ governments, as the basis for socialism. We appeal to rail workers who agree with this political perspective to contact the SEG, which is fighting to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in New Zealand.

The author also recommends:

A reply to the RMTU on the anti-working class record of the New Zealand rail unions
[29 September 2017]



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