

New Zealand transport workers' jobs and conditions under attack

Our correspondents
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Rail workers employed by transnational companies Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (THR) in New Zealand's capital, Wellington, confront another round of attacks on wages, jobs and conditions.

The Labour and Green Party-controlled Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) privatised the Wellington commuter rail service in July 2016 through a 15-year deal with THR to save \$100 million at the expense of jobs, wages, penalty rates and conditions.

The companies, abetted by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU), promised workers the “same or more favourable terms and conditions” as the previous operator Tranz Metro, part of the state-owned KiwiRail.

This has proved to be an outright lie. On July 15, the company discontinued 11 full-time passenger operator positions, further undermining onboard train staffing. Transdev removed these workers from off-peak weekday services, which were increased from half-hourly to every 20 minutes, and weekend services. This has increased workloads for train managers with busy trains, especially on peak-time passenger services.

Transdev has slashed thousands of dollars from its wages bill through staff cuts and stagnant wages. Before the job cuts, passenger operators earned between \$18.49 and \$19.09 an hour. In the 2014–2016 Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) between KiwiRail and the RMTU, before Transdev took over, passenger operators were paid between \$16.85 and \$18.35 an hour. Many workers depend on time-and-a-quarter penalty rates on weekdays, time-and-a-half on Saturdays and double-time on Sundays.

Some full-time passenger operators took “voluntary” redundancy, with others accepting part-time positions or other duties without regular access to penalty rates. The company has coerced most part-timers, on \$17.97

an hour, to do split-shifts. Their regular hours are little more than 40 hours a fortnight, nowhere near enough to keep up with rising living costs.

Fresh contract negotiations are underway for 400 THR rail workers for a new MECA. The 2017–2018 agreement expired last month after being belatedly ratified on April 9 through an anti-democratic secret ballot in which unreturned voting papers were counted in favour of the agreement.

Two weeks ago the RMTU and THR released a shared claims document for the new MECA. THR proposes a two-year term from July 2018 and a “feasible and meaningful” wage increase of 1.6 percent. Many rail workers have dismissed the offer as woefully inadequate and insulting, given the increase in workloads and spiralling cost of living.

THR falsely claims it wants to “protect” workers' living standards. Transdev has proposed a “relationship charter” to enhance collaboration and “good faith” bargaining with the RMTU and prevent strikes. The last contract round delivered a paltry 2 percent pay increase following a single 24-hour strike on November 16. The union cancelled a second strike after Hyundai Rotem dropped its demand to cut penalty rates for 44 maintenance workers.

The RMTU has called for an increase in penalty rates for those who work on rostered-days-off and ten days' sick leave, instead of six. As in previous negotiations, the union has not nominated a specific amount for a pay rise. Union delegates have told workers they are asking for a 4 percent wage increase.

Some of the union's claims from 2017 have been included, such as a “laundry allowance” for uniforms, a commitment for THR to become a “Living Wage” employer—a reference to a bogus campaign by various unions for a minimum “living wage” of \$20.55 an

hour—and minor adjustments to pay scales, allowances and service progression.

The RMTU is keeping workers in the dark over the negotiations. The union's publication, the *Activist*, reported on July 2 that it had "initiated bargaining with" THR. A notice posted in the Wellington staff room on August 20 said "employers tabled revised offers" at a previous meeting. The union notice provided no details, saying only that another negotiation meeting would be held on August 31. Rail workers have yet to find out when, or if, meetings will be held to discuss or ratify a deal.

The RMTU is preparing to impose another round of attacks on jobs and conditions. On August 9, RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson expressed the union's pro-business position in welcoming the appointment of new chairman for KiwiRail, Greg Miller, former CEO of Toll Group and Tranz Rail. Butson stated "it's always a pleasure to talk to an employer with experience in our industry," and pledged the RMTU "to assist the government and the new KiwiRail governance team in overcoming obstacles to prosperity."

Toll owned the national rail network from 2004 to 2008 and oversaw hundreds of job cuts. The then-Labour government bought back the network, essentially to bail out the company, which was losing money.

The consequences of RMTU's perspective can be seen in Auckland where Transdev is proposing to slash hundreds of train manager jobs through the introduction of driver-only operated (DOO) trains. The union's purported "campaign" against DOO has gone quiet as further negotiations between the company and the RMTU proceed behind closed doors.

Transport workers are joining other sections of the working class, including nurses, public servants and teachers, seeking to oppose over a decade of austerity measures. Train and bus workers face a political struggle against the privatisations and cost-cutting imposed by successive Labour and National governments since the 1980s, in which the unions have collaborated.

Regional councils manage the delivery of public transport by contracting private operators who profit from the provision of services. The Labour Party-run councils in Wellington and Auckland have played a key

role.

Last month, 50 bus drivers in the Hutt Valley took action over excessive workloads and illegal rosters. The GWRC recently awarded the private operator Tranzit 60 percent of the region's bus routes. The move was designed to cut costs by reducing services and attacking drivers' conditions.

The Tramways Union, which hopes to pressure Tranzit into talks for a collective agreement, is refusing to mobilise strike action by drivers in Wellington, who face the same conditions as the Hutt Valley workers.

The RMTU donated to Labour and the Greens in the last election and opposes the unification of bus and rail workers in a struggle against the councils and the Labour-led coalition government of Jacinda Ardern.



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