

New Zealand rail union promotes sellout at Wellington meeting

Our reporter
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Rail workers employed by transnational companies Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (THR) in New Zealand's capital, Wellington, held two-hour stop-work meetings on October 10 called by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) to ratify yet another pro-company Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA).

The workers operate and maintain Wellington region's commuter rail service, which was privatised by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) in 2016. The deal with THR is intended to save the council \$100 million over 15 years, while providing a windfall to the private companies, at the expense of jobs, wages and conditions.

The proposed new MECA, covering 425 workers, continues an effective wage freeze. It provides an increase of just 2.3 percent for most workers and 4.0 percent for passenger operators, who collect tickets, for the year from mid-2018 to July 2019. Voting is underway until November 2.

Workers should decisively reject this sellout. The increases do not make up for soaring living costs, including for petrol, electricity and housing. Across New Zealand, weekly rents for a three-bedroom house increased 25 percent between 2012 and 2017, but wages only rose 14 percent. The median house price in Wellington is \$594,000, up from about \$400,000 in 2012.

The Wellington meeting demonstrated, yet again, that the union is not a workers' organisation but an instrument of THR and the council. For decades, the RMTU and its predecessors have collaborated with governments and big business to suppress workers' resistance to privatisations, low wages and redundancies.

The terms of the proposed deal were presented to rail

workers following months of secret negotiations with employers. There was no democratic discussion among union members about what pay claims should be advanced or whether there should be a strike.

RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson gave the floor to Ian Ladd, Transdev's new managing director, and managers Emma MacRae and Mike Fenton, to promote the pro-company deal. After speaking, they left the meeting.

The increase for passenger operators, most of whom are part-time, will take their wage from \$17.97 to \$18.69 an hour (about \$2 above the minimum wage). A small number will earn \$19.23 and \$19.85 an hour. MacRae told workers talk of becoming a "living wage employer" was not "mere lip service." New Zealand's trade unions describe a "living wage" as \$20.55 an hour—still well below the actual cost of living.

Butson admitted that there "was nothing in the deal" for train managers and locomotive engineers other than the 2.3 percent wage rise.

Many workers depend on penalty rates of time-and-a-half on Saturday and double time on Sunday shifts. When the GWRC introduced new service timetables in July, many part-time workers took up gruelling split-shifts because they couldn't survive on their contracted 40 hours a fortnight.

With the RMTU's assistance, eleven full-time passenger operator jobs were destroyed, resulting in the "voluntary" redundancy of three workers with decades of experience, while others became part-time or accepted different jobs without regular access to penalty rates.

Asked by one worker why the wage increase was barely above the 2 percent in the 2017-2018 agreement, Fenton bluntly said Transdev had a limited "pot of money" from GWRC to allocate to wages.

The company representative said teachers and nurses, who recently took nationwide strike action after rejecting offers of 3 percent, had experienced real wage freezes for over a decade. Rail workers, however, have for years received wage rises barely above the official inflation rate.

Butson agreed that 2.3 percent was “the best” the union could get. He also boasted about the RMTU’s separate wage agreement with the nationwide state-owned company KiwiRail, which will deliver a mere \$1.60 per hour for more than 2,300 workers.

Such amounts are an insult to rail workers who have endured staff cuts and increased workloads since the services were privatised.

One worker expressed anger over the GWRC’s attempt to blame recent service cancellations on “high levels of staff illness.” In response, the company managers denied the obvious fact that the shortage of train drivers resulted from cancelled training programs last year. Fenton blamed a recruitment drive from Australia and the fact that a few locomotive engineers are approaching retirement age.

Following the company’s presentation, Butson declared demagogically that the union would “fight to the death” for wages and conditions, while at the same time arguing against a strike, and urging workers to accept the sellout agreement.

The RMTU dropped three of its own claims in negotiations with THR, without consulting its members. These were for an increase in penalty rates for staff who work on rostered-days-off, ten days sick leave instead of six and a laundry allowance for uniforms.

When an experienced train manager said six days of sick leave was inadequate, Butson claimed that if the allowance was increased to 10 days, THR would retaliate by capping the amount that workers could accumulate at 20 days. In short, the union accepted the companies’ demands.

A Terms of Settlement (TOS) document, which accompanies the draft MECA, accepts Transdev’s proposal for a “relationship charter” to solidify collaboration and “good faith” bargaining with the union to prevent further strikes.

The agreement provides no guarantee against more job cuts. THR merely agreed to “disclose any information” from the GWRC “on any proposal for

integrated ticketing (electronic ticketing) or any other changes that may affect the employment of members.”

In New Zealand’s largest city, Auckland, the introduction of electronic ticketing by the council and Transdev has been used to under-staff trains and push for the removal of all staff except drivers on services. Negotiations between the RMTU, Transdev and Auckland Council on driver-only trains have proceeded for months behind closed doors after industrial action in March was called off by the union.

The RMTU has made no attempt to unite the struggles in different parts of the country. The union has also sought to isolate Wellington rail workers from bus drivers in the capital, who are preparing to strike on October 23. The GWRC’s contracts with two private bus companies are designed to cut services, wages and conditions.

As with previous deals, the union-company agreement will be ratified through an anti-democratic postal ballot, in which unreturned voting papers are counted as “yes” votes. In a blatant attempt to intimidate workers, Butson said those opposed to the deal should return their “no” votes with a written reason for rejecting the agreement.

Transport workers face a political struggle against the privatisation and cost-cutting agenda imposed by successive Labour and National governments and councils since the 1980s.

The RMTU’s collaboration with these attacks demonstrates the need for a break with the unions and the establishment of new rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves. These must be guided by a socialist perspective, in opposition to all the parties in parliament, which fights to unite transport workers with nurses, teachers and others who are coming into struggle. Rail and other essential services must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

We urge workers to contact the Socialist Equality Group to discuss this perspective.



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