

New Zealand rail union enforces another pro-company pay deal

Our correspondent
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The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) has forced through its third pro-company wage contract with multinational companies Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (THR) covering 417 rail workers in Wellington, the New Zealand capital.

The workers run and maintain the region's commuter rail service, which was privatised by the Labour Party-dominated Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) in 2016 in order to save \$NZ100 million over 15 years at the expense of jobs, wages and conditions.

The RMTU confirmed ratification of the Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) in a one-page notice on November 5 that claimed "95.44 percent of members voted to accept the recommended settlement." THR issued a joint statement declaring they were "pleased" the deal had gone through.

The result is a fraud, achieved through an anti-democratic ballot process in which 398 unreturned voting papers were automatically counted as supporting the agreement. The RMTU issued 417 voting papers by post and received 19 "no" votes against the union-company deal. The previous 2017–18 contract, imposed by the same dishonest methods, received eight "no" votes when finally ratified in April.

The ballot was conducted after months of cynical manoeuvring by the RMTU designed to disenfranchise members. The terms were presented to rail workers following secret negotiations with employers. There were no mass meetings for union members to discuss what pay claims should be advanced or whether there should be a strike. In order to intimidate any opposition, workers who voted "no" were asked to write in a space on the ballot their reason for rejecting it.

The union ensured that rail workers were isolated from Wellington bus drivers, who struck last month

against the GWRC's private bus operators, as well as teachers, health workers and public servants who have held nationwide stoppages for improved pay and conditions. Workers are coming into conflict with the austerity measures of the Labour-led government. In every case the unions have sought to wear down and isolate workers to convince them there is no alternative to accepting sellout deals.

The RMTU is not a workers' organisation but an instrument of the companies and the GWRC. For decades, the union and its predecessors have collaborated with governments and big business to suppress workers' resistance to privatisations, low wages and redundancies.

In a settlement reached in August with the state-owned KiwiRail, the RMTU delivered a mere \$1.60 per hour raise for more than 2,300 workers nationwide. KiwiRail Chief Executive Peter Reidy praised the RMTU's "partnership" with the company, declaring that they had "worked closely together over the past three years on a High Performance, High Engagement program which brings management and workers together to develop frontline solutions to business issues."

The new THR contract, to run from mid-2018 to July 2019, is another case of craven collaboration on the part of the union. It includes a wage increase of just 2.3 percent for most workers and 4 percent for passenger operators, who collect tickets. The RMTU dropped three of its own claims in negotiations: an increase in penalty rates for employee who work rostered-days-off, ten instead of six days sick leave, and a "laundry allowance" for uniforms.

At a stop work meeting on October 10, RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson gave the podium to THR managers to sell the deal. General manager Mike

Fenton claimed the company had “shaken the couch upside down,” but there was only a limited “pot of money” for wages. Butson then insisted that a 2.3 percent pay rise was “the best” offer possible and argued against striking.

Most rail workers, excluding locomotive engineers, depend on penalty rates, paid at time-and-a-quarter (weekdays), time-and-a-half (Saturday) and double-time (Sunday). Passenger operators, who are part-time and do not earn regular penalty rates outside of special events, will go from \$17.97 an hour to \$18.69 an hour. A small number will earn \$19.23 and \$19.85 an hour.

The paltry increases fail to keep up with rising living costs, such as petrol, electricity and housing. Property values in Wellington’s working-class suburbs leapt more than 50 percent in the past three years. As a result home ownership has become impossible for many workers and rents have skyrocketed.

Last July, THR axed 11 full-time passenger operator jobs, assisted by the RMTU. Four workers were made redundant while others took part-time or different jobs without regular penalty rates.

The threat of further job cuts remains. THR has merely agreed to “disclose information” from GWRC over “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 utilisation of electronic ticketing has been used by the Labour Party-led council and Transdev to push for staff cuts.

A Wellington train driver, who spoke to the WSWs on condition of anonymity, said he voted against the agreement because the union “didn’t actually ask us what we would like.” It had simply presented the agreement with Transdev as an accomplished fact. “That’s what I’m angry about,” the worker said.

Asked what he thought of management appearing alongside Butson and union negotiators at the meeting to sell the proposed MECA, he said: “It shouldn’t have happened.” The message was: “This is all you’re getting, take it or leave it. That’s not the way it should be.”

He said the union had little contact with workers during negotiations and even union delegates apparently “didn’t know what’s going on.” Union leaders behaved like “a law unto themselves” and “like they’re part of the company, part of Transdev.” He said

it was “wrong” that workers who did not return their ballots were counted as having voted in favour of the agreement.

The train driver said the 2.3 percent pay increase was “not even anywhere near the actual cost of living.” He noted that many workers who had left or were made redundant had not been replaced, putting additional pressure on those who remained. Last month, 28 services were cancelled because of understaffing.

With long night-time shifts followed by early morning shifts “your health and your family life goes down the gurgler. [The employers] don’t value how difficult it is to drive.”

Fatigue among drivers was “quite dangerous” and had caused an increase in “signal passed at danger” (SPAD) incidents. In such cases, drivers can face disciplinary action, be temporarily stood down or even fired. “I’ve had a couple of SPADs over the years and I did not get any help from the union,” the driver told the WSWs.

The driver had voted for the Labour Party in the 2017 election, believing it was better than the previous National Party government. But, he said, “It doesn’t look like we’re doing any better. It’s supposed to be a more left-wing government, but it hasn’t done a lot yet.”

WSWS reporters explained that the Labour Party, which is supported by the RMTU, had begun the process of preparing New Zealand’s rail network for privatisation in the 1980s and had been instrumental in the attacks on rail workers’ jobs and conditions.



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