

Open letter to New Zealand rail workers: Form rank-and-file committees to fight for safe working conditions

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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Rail workers employed by Transdev in New Zealand face the imminent threat of being infected by the Omicron variant of COVID-19. The Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has ditched its previous policy of eliminating COVID-19 and fully embraced the policy of profits-before-lives implemented internationally by the ruling elite.

It has echoed the mantra of the capitalist governments internationally that the population must “live with the virus,” and declared that tens of thousands of people will be infected in the coming weeks and months.

Transdev, a French-based multinational company, operates commuter rail services in Wellington. Its workers, who interact with hundreds or thousands of passengers every day, are particularly vulnerable to the deadly virus. The company, local councils and the government have refused to provide adequate protections.

Transdev originally required workers to have their first shot of the Pfizer vaccine by January 17 but pushed this back by two weeks to January 31, without any serious explanation. Workers must have their second shot by March 11 or lose their employment.

Given the threat of Omicron, transport workers should be lining up to get their boosters now. But Transdev’s policy has encouraged complacency, putting both workers and passengers at risk. If a worker received their first shot at the end of January, it would be another five months before they received all three shots that are necessary to provide a significant level of protection against Omicron. Nationwide, only about a third of people aged over 18 have received a third shot.

The company’s policy on masks is no better. It has been distributing inferior surgical masks and reusable

masks that have been shown to be ineffective at blocking out the virus compared to superior N95 or better masks. The country faces a shortage of N95s and the Ardern government has refused to recommend them for most people outside the healthcare sector.

The government has opposed reinstating full or partial lockdowns to eliminate Omicron from the community. The mitigation measures under its “red” traffic light system guarantee that Omicron will spread in passenger train services. Trains can seat 150 people in two cars, and most peak-time services are at least six cars. Passengers do not have to be physically distanced, and while they must wear masks, many of these are inadequate.

There is no requirement for passengers to be vaccinated. The reopening of schools and childcare centres means that some trains will be crowded with children who are only partially vaccinated, or not at all. As of January 24, just one in five children aged 5 to 12 had received a first dose.

Previously, during the lockdowns of March–April 2020 and August–September 2021, onboard staff were separated from passengers with tape. A locomotive engineer and train manager would be in one car and passengers in other taped-off carriages. Fares were not collected.

The Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), which contracts Transdev, is instructing it to run services as close to the pre-pandemic normal as possible. Timetables will be reduced only if there are significant staff shortages due to workers being infected with COVID-19. A small number of workers opposed to vaccination may also lose their jobs.

The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU)

supports the government's policy to allow COVID to spread, and has done nothing to oppose the dangerous working conditions imposed by the company. Public transport workers, whose wages have been suppressed for decades with the collaboration of the unions, are also being affected by the soaring cost of living. Annual inflation now stands at 5.9 percent. There is significant anger that Transdev has delayed paying workers holiday pay that they are owed for the period from 2019 to the present, blaming a technical problem in its payroll system. The company says workers need to wait for "the successful transition to a compliant payroll system, so staff are paid correctly."

The 2019–2022 Multi-Employment Collective Agreement is due to expire on July 3. Workers want a significant pay increase of at least 8–10 percent or more.

The RMTU has sought to divide Transdev workers from those employed on the national KiwiRail network and other transport workers, who face all the same issues. In December, the union unilaterally cancelled a scheduled strike by KiwiRail workers against low wages and presented a sellout agreement to workers.

The imminent dangers facing Transdev workers raise the urgent need for worker-controlled safety committees to be built, independent of the pro-capitalist unions. These rank-and-file committees must fight to unite train workers with bus drivers and other workers facing the same life-threatening conditions. They must oppose the Ardern government's criminal policy of letting COVID-19 spread, and fight for a fully-funded policy to reduce COVID cases to zero and eliminate the pandemic, in New Zealand and internationally.

Crucially, these committees must also unite transport workers in New Zealand with others throughout the world, including Australia, who face the same life-and-death struggle to stop the spread of COVID—in opposition to private companies, governments and unions, which promote nationalism to divide the working class.

To make the trains safe for passengers and staff, the Socialist Equality Group proposes that Transdev rail workers fight for the following immediate demands:

- Only triple-vaccinated staff can work on trains and at stations. Those not yet fully vaccinated to be placed on furlough, on full pay.
- Workers with pre-existing health conditions that

place them at greater risk from COVID must isolate at home, on full pay.

- No one to work without an N95 mask, or one offering an equivalent level of protection.
- A return to strict physical distancing of workers from passengers, and passengers from each other. Passenger numbers should be strictly limited to ensure safe conditions on carriages.
- All passengers must wear N95 or similar masks. Transdev and the GWRC must provide masks for free to all who need them.



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