

COVID infects hundreds of public transport workers in New Zealand

Our correspondent
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The Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) in New Zealand, and the private companies which it contracts for bus and train services, are refusing to implement safety measures that are urgently needed to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Stuff reported on March 11 that over 190 Wellington public transport bus, train and harbour ferry workers had been infected in the past week. There are five main public transport companies contracted by the council: NZ Bus, Tranzit, Uzabus, Mana Coach Services and rail operator Transdev.

About 400 public transport workers in Auckland were off work because of COVID, the *New Zealand Herald* reported yesterday. About 15 percent of services in NZ's biggest city were cancelled as a result.

The rapid spread of the virus is also impacting on travel between the North and South Islands. The Interislander ferry cancelled two passenger services on March 6, affecting over 900 passengers, after 55 workers tested positive and began self-isolating. Some passengers who were waiting to board were forced to sleep in their cars. The competing Bluebridge ferry also had positive cases, but no services were cancelled.

During the temporary lockdowns imposed by the Labour Party-led government in 2020 and 2021, public transport workers worked on a reduced timetable, with safety measures including passenger limits and physical distancing.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the end of its elimination policy in October last year, against the advice of epidemiologists and public health experts. Like governments around the world, Ardern promised big business there would be no more lockdowns or any measures that would significantly disrupt profit-making. The government is telling the population they must "live with" the potentially deadly virus circulating

in the community indefinitely.

The result is a worsening disaster, with more than 20,000 cases being reported per day. There are more than 209,000 active cases. Yesterday, 856 people were in hospital and there were seven newly reported deaths, the highest-ever daily figure for New Zealand.

There have been 98 COVID-related deaths in total during the pandemic, according to the Ministry of Health. The figure has more than tripled since last year.

Scott Gallacher, general manager of the GWRC public transport agency Metlink, told *Stuff*, "we expect many more" workers to become infected "as the pandemic reaches its peak."

The council has taken no action to improve safety and is encouraging workers to view infection as inevitable. It is refusing to implement a reduced timetable, or to reintroduce social distancing on public transport. Despite this, many trains are already running half-empty or well below seated capacity as passengers choose work from home, or are in self-isolation.

Transdev, a French-based multinational company that runs passenger rail services in Wellington, has refused to reinstate safety measures used during the last two lockdowns. This included red tape separating on-board staff from passengers, instructions telling passengers to distance from each other, and limits on passenger numbers.

Train managers and passenger operators are still expected to handle cash and clip tickets from passengers despite the obvious risks. Some workers told the WWSW that they have heard the council will only implement a reduced schedule for train services in the event that 30 percent of staff are incapable of working.

Onboard staff faced significant risks in recent weeks when many unmasked and unvaccinated passengers

took the train to and from the far-right protest at parliament. Many protesters tested positive for COVID.

Transdev workers have not been told how many of their co-workers have tested positive. Cases are already disrupting services. *Stuff* reported: “The Johnsonville Line train service stopped operating on Thursday at 3.30 p.m. when one of its drivers called in sick.”

The company has attempted to sow complacency about vaccination by only requiring workers to have their first shot of the Pfizer vaccine by January 31 and their second shot by March 11. Three shots are needed for significant protection from Omicron for serious illness and death (even then, the vaccine is not 100 percent effective).

Workers are required to wear masks, but are only given inferior surgical masks. Workers have to buy their own N95 or other superior masks.

The government’s grossly inadequate mitigation measures guarantee the spread of Omicron in trains and buses. The new mantra is “personal responsibility,” not the responsibility of the government and employers to place workplace safety over profits.

Thousands of people, including transport workers, are now self-testing with rapid antigen tests (RATs), and are told to self-report their results.

Transdev is enforcing the government’s new self-isolation rule, which only requires workers to stay home for 7 days—down from 10—if they test positive or live with someone who has COVID. Professor Michael Plank, a COVID-19 modeller, recently told Radio NZ that research from the UK showed that about one in six people remain infectious for longer than 7 days.

The rail company continues to refuse to pay special leave for workers with COVID. Those that test positive are forced to use sick or annual leave in order to isolate, or rely on insultingly low government support weekly payments of around \$300 for part-time workers and \$600 for full-time workers.

Rail workers are being hit by soaring living costs, with inflation already at 5.9 percent and set to rise further. The 2019–2022 Multi-Employment Collective Agreement (MECA) between Transdev and Hyundai Rotem (its maintenance subcontractor) and the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) is due to expire on July 3 and workers are demanding a pay increase of 8–10 percent or more. Staff are incensed that Transdev has delayed paying their holiday pay entitlements for

the period 2019 to the present.

The immediate issue facing all public transport workers is that the trade unions are enforcing the Labour government’s “let it rip” agenda. The RMTU, which helps fund Labour’s election campaigns, has remained silent on the COVID surge among Wellington rail workers. Transdev says that it is working in close consultation with the union.

The unions have mounted no industrial campaign to demand the shutdown of nonessential businesses and schools, as part of a properly-funded elimination strategy. The experience of China, and New Zealand in 2020–2021, prove that this is the only way to stop significant levels of illness and death.

In an open letter to New Zealand rail workers, published on February 1, the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) called on them to form new organisations—rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions. These committees would forge links with other workers, in NZ and internationally, to fight for policies needed to stamp out COVID and save lives.

To make trains safe for workers and passengers, the SEG proposed the following 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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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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