

New Zealand: Wellington rail workers face struggle against corporations, government and union bureaucracy

Our correspondent
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Workers on the commuter railway network in Wellington, New Zealand, face a looming struggle over wages and conditions. Their employers, Transdev and subcontractor Hyundai Rotem, along with the Labour Party-led Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), are working together to drive down costs at the expense of workers, while the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) is collaborating to impose a sellout.

On October 31 the RMTU confirmed that in a vote of 338 ballots, 100 percent of workers had rejected a below-inflation pay offer. The proposed two-year contract (from July 2022 to July 2024) had included a 5 percent increase in the first year and 4 percent in the second year—both well below the current inflation rate of 7.2 percent and the soaring cost of living.

Since Transdev took over the council contract in 2016, it has overseen staff reductions, wages barely keeping pace with inflation, the prioritisation of “on-time performance” and a shift work system that severely affects workers’ health and wellbeing. The company promised GWRC it would slash \$100 million over its 15-year contract at the expense of workers’ wages, jobs, and conditions.

Following the Labour Party-led government’s decision in late 2021 to dismantle public health measures and adopt a criminal policy of mass COVID-19 infection, Transdev and the GWRC have removed all mask mandates and social distancing on trains. The RMTU enforced these decisions, which have led to the repeated infection of rail workers.

Over 30 trains were cancelled on Monday, December 12. GWRC chairman Daran Ponter told Radio NZ high staff shortages were caused by COVID, flu and other illnesses. Despite the staffing crisis the council refuses to implement a reduced half-hour timetable on the Kapiti,

Hutt Valley and Johnsonville lines—placing immense pressure on workers.

Chronic understaffing is also due to some workers leaving the job or retiring because of stress related to low pay and unsociable schedules enforced by the union.

The cancellation of services means trains are typically packed. With most passengers and staff not wearing masks, these are ideal conditions for the spread of the coronavirus.

Workers receive little more than the minimum wage of \$21.20 an hour. Train managers are paid \$25.78 an hour in their first year (level 1) and a top rate of just \$27.37 after 10 years (level 4). They are forced to rely on penalty rates of time-and-a-quarter (for overtime on weekdays), time-and-a-half (on Saturdays) and double-time (Sundays).

The result is hectic shift patterns, often with little rest between shifts. This is compounded by two major 40k/hr “temporary speed restrictions” on the Kapiti line which leads to trains arriving at Wellington up to 5-10 minutes late, cutting into meal breaks.

Passenger operators, who clip tickets, are forced into split-shifts and are paid as little as \$23.65—which the trade unions falsely describe as a “living wage.” Transdev disestablished 11 full-time passenger operators in July 2018. The company has said it will reinstate “full-time passenger operators” but these workers will be required to fill in as relief for train managers.

Employers and the RMTU are negotiating behind closed doors to renew a fifth Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) after the previous three-year agreement expired in July 2022. That contract delivered three pay increases of just 3 percent, effectively keeping wages frozen against rising living costs.

With the cost of living now sky-rocketing, many

workers are angry that Transdev has still not given holiday pay owed for the period 2019 to the present, which has been delayed for over a year.

The union has not announced any specific wage claim, nor has it announced any strike action. Its decision to present workers with the below-inflation offer, while recommending that members reject it, was a ploy aimed at dragging out negotiations and wearing down workers' resistance to a sellout.

Meanwhile the company is making more cuts, with no opposition from the union. Ticket offices at outer stations on the Kapiti, Hutt Valley and the Wairarapa lines will be closed with the introduction of electronic ticketing. Workers face either redundancy or redeployment within the company. The closures include the Featherston and Carterton station ticket offices, which have been open since 1878 and 1880.

The RMTU has decades of experience in imposing one sellout agreement after another, along with mass job cuts and privatisations, under successive Labour and National Party governments.

In December 2021, the union unilaterally cancelled a two-day strike that had been overwhelmingly approved by 2,500 workers, which would have shut down the country's rail and inter-island ferry system. The union pushed through a pay rise of just \$2.48 an hour.

To wage a real fight against the relentless attacks on working conditions and wages imposed by councils and private companies, backed by the Labour government and the trade unions, workers need new organisations that they control.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on New Zealand rail workers to follow the example of those in the United States, who have formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The committee, controlled by workers and independent of the unions, is fighting to unite rail workers who are divided into 12 different unions, which all serve the interests of the corporations and the Biden administration.

Some 30,000 conductors, yardmen and other workers in SMART-TD, the largest American rail union, voted in late November to reject a White House-brokered contract between the unions and over 30 rail carriers. Altogether, 120,000 railroaders are fighting for better working conditions including paid sick leave, and better rostering so they can spend more time with their families.

A national strike scheduled for December 9 was banned by an anti-strike bill supported by the Democrats and Republicans and by the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists

of America. The union bureaucracy is telling workers they have no choice but to submit to this attack. The Rank-and-File Committee is seeking to mobilise opposition to this assault on workers' first amendment democratic right to strike.

Rail struggles are also erupting in the UK, where 40,000 workers held a two-day strike on December 13-14 and another was scheduled for December 16-17. As in the US, the RMT union is working with the government and employers to try and impose below-inflation deals.

The wave of rail strikes internationally is part of the re-emergence of the class struggle in response to the capitalist crisis exacerbated by the pandemic, rampant financial speculation and the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

In New Zealand, tens of thousands of healthcare and manufacturing workers, firefighters and university employees have recently taken industrial action against regressive wage offers and deteriorating working conditions. In every case the unions have sought to impose sellout deals while preventing a unified movement against austerity and the government's "let it rip" pandemic policy.

To succeed, workers require their own organisations, and a socialist perspective to unite workers across borders against corporations like Transdev. This means a political fight against Labour and the entire capitalist political establishment as well as the unions.

The railways, along with other essential industries, should not be run for private profit, but as essential public services. They must be nationalised and placed under the democratic control of the working class. This calls for the building of a socialist and internationalist party in New Zealand to lead the fight for a workers' government.

The SEG calls on rail workers in Wellington, Auckland and across the country to contact us to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact