

New Zealand: Reject sellout of Wellington rail workers!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers on the passenger railway network in Wellington, New Zealand, to reject the sellout deal recommended to them by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU). The proposed Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA), details of which were announced by the union just before Christmas, contains substantial cuts to real wages for hundreds of workers employed by Transdev and subcontractor Hyundai Rotem.

The sellout underscores the necessity for rail workers to take up a struggle against the RMTU leadership and establish new organisations: rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves and independent of the pro-capitalist bureaucracy and the political establishment.

Throughout the country, workers are facing an onslaught against their standard of living, as the corporate elite seeks to resolve the crisis of capitalism by driving down real wages and increasing unemployment. The Labour Party-led government is leading the austerity drive, while the corporatist trade unions are working with big business and the state to enforce the attacks and prevent any unified fight by workers to defend their wages and conditions.

Transdev is contracted to provide commuter rail services by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), which is chaired by the Labour Party's Daran Ponter. The multinational French-based company has promised multi-million-dollar savings to the council, to be achieved at the expense of workers.

The union-backed agreement contains wage increases of just 5.5 percent for most roles for the period from September 2022 to July 2023, followed by an increase of 5 percent in the second year. This is well below the current inflation rate of 7.2 percent and the 10.7 percent increase in food prices over the past year.

Train managers would receive a 7.2 percent raise each year, which is still an effective wage freeze. Only a small group of yard supervisors would get an above-inflation increase of 13 percent in the first year and 11.5 percent in the second.

The proposed MECA contains nothing to address the extremely unsafe conditions facing workers due to the raging COVID-19 pandemic, which has infected some workers multiple times. The RMTU, like all the unions, has accepted and enforced the criminal policy of mass infection adopted by the Labour government at the end of 2021.

Mask mandates and social distancing have been scrapped on public transport, endangering passengers and crew alike, with zero opposition from the unions. The removal of practically all public health measures has resulted in approximately 2,900 deaths over the past year.

The new offer endorsed by the RMTU is barely any different to the first offer from Transdev, which was a 5 percent increase in the first year and 4 percent in the second year. This was resoundingly rejected last October by 338 workers—100 percent of the RMTU members at Transdev and Hyundai Rotem.

Despite workers' clear determination to fight for real improvements to wages and working conditions, the RMTU refused to ballot its members for strike action. Following the rejection of the first offer, the union re-entered negotiations with management, behind closed doors, to come up with another sellout.

The union has not announced any mass stop-work meetings for workers to discuss and debate the new offer. Instead, four separate "report back" meetings are being held this week, which many workers will be unable to attend due to their demanding rosters on the under-staffed network.

The purpose of these meetings, according to a union memo, is to “provide the context in which the current MECA proposals were reached” and to answer members’ questions. The RMTU’s aim is to demoralise workers and persuade them that there is no point in fighting for a real wage increase given the present economic climate.

The entire process is designed to prevent a broad discussion and secure a ‘yes’ vote. The RMTU operates an anti-democratic postal voting system, under which workers who do not return a ballot are automatically counted as voting in favour of the agreement.

The RMTU is not a workers’ organisation but a well-paid bureaucracy whose interests are tied to the strengthening of New Zealand capitalism. According to its financial statements for 2020 (the most recent available), the RMTU spent more than \$860,000 on staff salaries and expenses. The union had more than \$5.2 million in investments, including numerous bank term deposits, more than \$1.4 million in shares in the Port of Tauranga, plus smaller amounts invested in Auckland Airport and developer Marsden Maritime Holdings.

In opposition to the RMTU, the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees to organise a real fight for demands that address the urgent needs of workers, not what Transdev and the GWRC claim they can afford. These demands include a substantial above-inflation pay increase and COVID-safe working conditions, including the return of strict social distancing and mask mandates on all trains.

Rail workers’ committees would establish links with bus, ferry and other transport workers, as well as healthcare and education workers who have carried out significant struggles over the past year. They would also fight to link up with Transdev workers in Europe, Australia and North America, based on the understanding that the fight against such multi-national businesses requires an international strategy, completely opposed to the nationalism promoted by the trade unions.

Workers in New Zealand can learn valuable lessons from the experiences of the Railroad Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee in the United States. It is leading the fight to unite workers across the country in

opposition to the Biden administration, the rail corporations and the unions, which have imposed major attacks on workers and sought to block strike action.

Above all, rail workers must recognise that they face a political fight not only against Transdev and other corporations, but also the Labour-led GWRC and the Ardern Labour government and its union backers.

The RMTU and its predecessors have a long record of collaborating with Labour and National governments to impose mass redundancies, privatisations and pro-business restructuring across the rail network.

With an election due later this year, the RMTU, which regularly donates thousands of dollars to the Labour Party, has already begun campaigning. An article in the union’s *Transport Worker* magazine in December declared that the Ardern government has done “great work” in office over the last five years, without giving any actual examples.

In fact, this period has seen the unprecedented handout of tens of billions of dollars by the government and the Reserve Bank to private banks and corporations, leading to soaring social inequality, rampant inflation, along with thousands of preventable deaths from COVID-19 in 2022.

The SEG calls on workers to adopt a socialist perspective. This means rejecting the lies of the Labour Party and the unions that there is no money to properly fund public transport and to pay workers a decent wage. Tens of billions of dollars must be redirected from the coffers of the super-rich into healthcare, education, transport and other services.

The working class needs its own revolutionary party, to fight for a workers’ government that will place rail and other major industries under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, to be run as essential services, not for the accumulation of private profit.

We urge rail workers to share this statement and contact us to discuss the way forward.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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