

Spate of breakdowns in New Zealand's railways and ferries

Our correspondent
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The long-term decline of passenger rail and ferry services in New Zealand has been exposed following a series of recent breakdowns and disruptions in Auckland and Wellington and the near crippling of a passenger ferry in January.

On April 28, the state-owned rail company KiwiRail announced a blanket 70km/h “temporary speed restriction” on the Wellington region’s Kapiti, Hutt Valley and Wairarapa passenger rail lines due to last-minute maintenance repairs needed on an EM80 track evaluation car. This vehicle, which conducts regular track safety inspections, was the only one of its kind in New Zealand—despite 17,000 being manufactured by the global company Plasser & Theurer. The reduced speed limit lasted for three days.

The private operator of passenger rail services in Wellington, Transdev—a French-based corporation contracted by the Labour-led Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC)—responded by reducing services from May 1 to 3. As a result, overcrowded six-car trains were forced to leave passengers and school students behind at stations, disrupting tens of thousands of people’s daily lives.

KiwiRail chairperson David McLean told politicians at a parliamentary select committee that the company had “let the people of Wellington down.” He admitted the vehicle should have completed evaluations of the Kapiti line before the compliance deadline of April 30.

KiwiRail CEO Peter Reidy, however, defended the company’s reliance on just one EM80 vehicle for the past 41 years, saying this was “adequate” to cover the entire country’s rail network and “we don’t think taxpayers of New Zealand would want us investing \$20 million in a plant that wasn’t being used.”

A replacement EM80 vehicle, priced at over \$20 million, has been ordered but will not be available until

2026?2027. By contrast, the Labour government has allocated \$748 million over four years for the military, as New Zealand strengthens its alliance with the US and Australia in preparation for war against China.

GWRC chairman Daran Ponter criticised the “monumental failure,” “abysmal lack of accountability and management” and “poor maintenance of this essential piece of equipment holding the entire North Island’s rail network hostage.” Ponter told *Newshub* on May 1 that “these rail lines are the arteries for Wellington, this is where we bring our CBD workers into the city and this sort of event is just causing chaos.”

These criticisms reek of hypocrisy. The council refused to adjust its untenable timetables last year despite chronic understaffing by train managers and passenger operators, which resulted in daily cancellations and reduced services. The council has previously instructed Transdev to reduce costs on the regional rail network, including through wage freezes and staff cuts.

The local councils and transport operators have also endangered lives by removing all public health measures, including masking and social distancing, allowing COVID-19 to infect and reinfect staff and passengers. The Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) has enforced this criminal policy.

As for the Labour-Greens national government, Transport Minister Michael Wood announced an “urgent review.” KiwiRail also launched its own investigation into the breakdown of the EM80 vehicle and the reduction of services.

On May 5, passenger train services in Auckland, the country’s biggest city, were cancelled, after a power fault was discovered at 4 a.m. Electricity was arcing from overhead power lines, prompting KiwiRail to turn

off overhead power for the Southern, Eastern, Western and Onehunga railway lines. The company blamed high humidity for the shutdown.

The city council's Auckland Transport, which contracts rail services to private operator Auckland One Rail, said over 10,000 commuters' travel was disrupted. On May 18, another power failure occurred on the railway line between Penrose and Papakura during the evening rush hour, resulting in cancellations and reduced services.

KiwiRail plans to close large sections of the Auckland rail network from 2023 to 2025 as part of a supposed "rail network rebuild" that will further disrupt and reduce passenger travel on the network.

On May 18 also, the Transport Accident Investigation Commission (TAIC) released a report on the cause of the engine failure of KiwiRail's Interislander *Kaitaki* ferry on January 28. The ferry was carrying 800 passengers and 80 crew across the Cook Strait between the North and South Islands. It drifted more than a nautical mile off the rocky south coast of Wellington in wind gusts of over 100km/h before dropping anchor. It arrived three hours late into Wellington harbour, accompanied by tugboats.

TAIC reported that one of the ferry's safety-critical rubber expansion joints failed and stopped the engine restarting. KiwiRail failed to follow the manufacturer's advice that the joints "should be no older than eight months when installed, inspected annually and replaced after five years." The device was made in 2005 and installed in 2018.

The ship returned to service last month after the joint was replaced and a gearbox fault repaired. Both the KiwiRail-owned Interislander and rival Bluebridge have cancelled sailings on the critical route recently due to mechanical failures.

Ponter and Marlborough Mayor Nadine Taylor wrote a joint letter to Wood raising concern over vessels breaking down in the Cook Strait, with nearby tugboats unsuitable for towing large ships or rescuing people. Prime Minister Chris Hipkins responded with assurances that "new ships are on the way, unfortunately those inter-island ferries take a number of years to manufacture."

The dangerous underfunding of the rail and ferry network is the product of repeated rounds of pro-business restructuring and privatisation by both Labour

and National Party-led governments, in collaboration with the rail unions.

Major attacks on rail workers began under the 1984-1990 Labour government of Prime Minister David Lange, when the state-owned NZ Railways (NZR) was transformed into a profit-driven State-Owned Enterprise, resulting in the slashing of over 13,000 jobs by 1990.

In 1993 the National government privatised NZR, renamed Tranz Rail, for \$328 million to a joint NZ-US consortium, led by merchant bank Fay Richwhite and US-based rail operator Wisconsin Central Transportation Corp. In 2004 Australian-based Toll Holdings took over Tranz Rail. Throughout this time jobs were destroyed, branch lines, workshops and regional passenger services closed. The Labour government of Prime Minister Helen Clark bought back the rail and ferry company for \$690 million in 2008.

The RMTU and its trade union predecessors collaborated in the restructuring, preventing any unified fightback and consistently cheerleading for the Labour Party. The union made no comment on the recent spate of breakdowns in its May newsletter, the *Activist*. In May last year, then general secretary Wayne Butson praised the reinstatement of Reidy as KiwiRail CEO as "a positive move" and noted that the union had "worked positively with Mr Reidy in the past and intends to do so in the future."



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