

Socialist Equality Group meeting on Wellington rail workers' dispute calls for rank-and-file committee

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand hosted an online meeting on August 25 to discuss the way forward in the Wellington rail workers' dispute. Members of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia also participated, drawing attention to the need for an internationally coordinated fight by rail workers in both countries.

Last week more than 300 workers on the capital's commuter rail network voted unanimously to reject an offer from Transdev and Hyundai Rotem which would have cut their wages relative to the cost of living. It included a pay increase of just 4 to 5 percent for the first year, followed by two annual increases pegged to the inflation rate. The companies also demanded new restrictions on sick leave, cuts to retiree payouts, and no back-pay to July when the workers' last collective agreement expired.

The SEG meeting warned that the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) is working with the companies to prepare a sellout deal. The speakers presented the case for workers to build a rank-and-file committee, independent of the union and the political establishment, to organise the broadest possible fightback in New Zealand and internationally against the corporate attacks.

James (not his real name), a Transdev worker, began the meeting by pointing to the significance of the fact that only the SEG and the *World Socialist Web Site* had reported on the dispute. The RMTU, the opposition Labour Party and the corporate media "remain silent in these workers' struggles so as to isolate rail workers from the rest of the working class, to create the conditions for a sellout."

James' opening report explained that the union had not announced any demands in the negotiations. "The reason is clear: the union bureaucracy doesn't want to be held to account to a specific wage demand," he said. It presented the employers' demands, knowing workers would reject them; "the union will now go back into 'negotiations' and return later with a very similar offer and tell workers: 'this is the best we could do.'"

The rail worker warned that the RMTU "is not a workers' organisation, but a bureaucratic apparatus run by a middle-class

layer, loyal to the Labour and the Green parties," which led the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC). The GWRC privatised the operation of rail services in 2015-2016, with the aim of saving \$100 million over 15 years while creating opportunities for private companies to profit at the expense of workers.

James explained that the rail unions were continuing the role they had played since the 1980s.

"The situation facing rail workers in New Zealand is the product of decades of privatisation and cost-cutting which began when the 1984-1990 Labour government transformed the public service NZ Rail into a State-Owned Enterprise whose purpose was to make a profit and compete with private businesses. Under Labour over 13,000 rail jobs were destroyed in the late 1980s.

"The globalisation of production undermined the program of national reformism of the Labour Party and the trade unions. The unions, having no progressive answer to the corporate 'market reforms,' accepted their new role as industrial policemen of the working class and adjuncts of management."

A rank-and-file committee, controlled by workers themselves, would advance demands based on the actual needs of workers. These included: "Serious wage increases of 20-30 percent to cover what has been lost in previous near-inflation deals," the reinstatement of staff who have lost their jobs, and rostering changes to avoid long shifts and worker fatigue. The committee would also fight for the unification of Transdev workers in New Zealand with their counterparts in Australia.

The next speaker, leading SEG member Tom Peters, explained that the attack on rail workers was part of an historic assault on the working class and preparations for world war being undertaken across the world in response to the worsening crisis of global capitalism. New Zealand's National Party-led government has sacked more than 6,000 public service workers and is severely underfunding public hospitals and other services. The unions, he said, "agree that cuts have to be made so that more money can be redirected into tax cuts for the rich, and to free up money to be spent on the military."

Peters emphasised that Wellington rail workers are in an

international struggle against multinational companies which exploit thousands of workers in dozens of countries. He pointed out that “for the past two months Transdev workers in the Sydney trams have been involved in a struggle over wages and conditions,” after rejecting a deal that amounted to a four-year wage freeze. Both the RMTU in New Zealand and the Australian Rail Tram and Bus Industry Union (RTBU) in Australia “are seeking to keep workers in the dark about what is happening internationally in order to isolate and weaken them,” Peters said.

A key task of a rank-and-file committee will be to fight for a unified struggle between workers on both sides of the Tasman Sea in opposition to the nationalism promoted by the unions.

Such an organisation would also publicise and oppose Hyundai Rotem’s involvement in the production of battle tanks and armoured vehicles for South Korea, Poland and countries in the Middle East. Peters explained that “the profits that it extracts from workers in New Zealand and throughout the world are being used in part to fuel the war against Russia, and war preparations against China, North Korea” and in the Middle East. The RMTU has remained silent on this critical issue.

Pointing to the Canadian government’s recent decision to ban a strike by 9,300 rail workers, Peters said the capitalist governments “are immensely fearful that a strike by rail workers would send a signal to all sections of the working class which are looking for a way to fight against the never-ending attacks on living standards.” The imperialist powers are also seeking to stamp out any potential for industrial “disruption,” particularly in strategic industries such as transport, as they prepare for war.

During the discussion, John Braddock, a member of the SEG and writer for the WSWS, elaborated on the “bitter experience” of the “wholesale assault on public services and jobs” carried out by New Zealand’s 1984-1990 Labour government led by David Lange and Roger Douglas.

“New Zealand, for its size, had quite an extensive rail system, built up over a century, connected with transporting farm produce to the ports.” The Labour government prepared rail and other industries for privatisation.

“Two large railway workshops, in Dunedin and Whanganui, were simply shut down. These workshops provided an important base for the training of apprentices. They were also centres of employment for Māori workers, who were thrown on the scrap-heap.” Rail lines to Gisborne and elsewhere were closed as meat processing and other industries were downsized, with “massive loss of jobs and services.”

Warwick Dove, a member of the SEP in Australia, explained that similar processes had taken place in that country. “Workers can’t trust the trade union officials, the Labor Party leaders, to defend their interests,” he said. “Their track record is completely destroying the ability for workers to be organised, the isolation of workers, [which is] what happens in every

strike. These matters need to be discussed and the rank-and-file committee is a way for these questions to be thrashed out. The seriousness of what workers confront has to be faced up to.”

Cheryl Crisp, national secretary of the Australian SEP, explained that the globalisation of production was a progressive development in itself, allowing much more efficient organisation of production across borders. “Under capitalism, however, it becomes the mechanism for the destruction of whole areas of the economy.”

Workers in every country tried to resist the destruction of jobs during the 1980s, including in the 1984 British miners’ strike, the air traffic controllers’ struggle in the US and many strikes in Australia and New Zealand. “But workers went into those struggles with their hands tied behind their backs because of their leadership,” Crisp said.

Now, after “40 years in which the working class, to a large degree, was pushed back by its leadership,” there is widespread distrust of the union bureaucracy. “What we have to fight to do is to encourage workers to take matters into their own hands,” and to oppose the conception “that somebody else knows better.”

Above all, workers required a socialist political perspective to develop opposition both to austerity and to the beginnings of a third world war, in which both Australia and New Zealand are already fully integrated. A war economy, Crisp said, would be funded through even deeper cuts to workers’ living standards, making the previous attacks pale in comparison.

She concluded by calling for a campaign to mobilise rail and other transport workers in both Australia and New Zealand, to “create an independent mechanism whereby workers can develop their own perspective, organisation and program for what are going to be very bitter struggles in the working class, because that’s what war produces.”

The SEG and the SEP call on Transdev and Hyundai Rotem workers in New Zealand and Australia to contact us today to discuss the way forward in this dispute.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact