

Reject sellout of Wellington, New Zealand rail workers!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers in the Wellington commuter rail network to vote “No” on the sellout agreement reached between the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) and the multinational companies Transdev and Hyundai Rotem.

The three-year deal recommended by the union bureaucracy—after it called off limited work-to-rule industrial action—would increase wages by just 4.7 percent in the first year, followed by two years of increases pegged to inflation.

This amounts to a real wage cut: it is well below the increased cost of living, which is not captured by the inflation rate. According to government statistics, annual inflation in the 12 months to June was 3.3 percent, while household living costs increased 5.4 percent, driven by soaring costs for insurance, interest rates and fuel.

At a stop-work meeting on September 26, which lasted less than an hour, union officials described the new offer as “the best we could do” and told workers that further industrial action was unlikely to change anything. In fact, the offer is almost unchanged from an initial one which workers overwhelmingly rejected last month.

The companies have withdrawn their most inflammatory proposals for cuts to travel allowances and payments to retirees and staff no longer able to work due to injury or illness. They have also agreed to give back pay to July, when the previous collective agreement expired.

Nothing will be done to address severe understaffing, which was exposed by the industrial action: workers taking their breaks and refusing to work overtime caused significant disruption, including the cancellation of dozens of train services. The new agreement includes a vague promise that Transdev and the RMTU

will make changes to rosters within four months, which does not commit them to anything.

The RMTU has worked to place maximum pressure on workers to accept the new sellout. The bureaucracy reached agreement with management following talks on September 20, but details of the offer were withheld from workers for nearly a week.

On September 23, the union bureaucracy called off industrial action at the behest of management, without consulting workers, who had previously voted 99 percent in favour of a strike. The media applauded the return to normal services on September 24 and treated the dispute as over, before workers had seen the new offer.

Workers had no chance to read and consider the proposed deal before it was presented to them at the September 26 meeting. The meeting did not allow adequate time for discussion and was only attended by perhaps 150 workers—less than half the workforce of more than 400 people. No further mass meetings have been scheduled.

Throughout the dispute the union bureaucracy has kept workers in the dark as much as possible. It refused to make any specific demands for improved wages and conditions and instead told workers they had no alternative to accepting the demands of the companies for effective wage cuts.

In order to demoralise workers and wear down their resistance to a sellout, the RMTU sought to isolate them from others in Wellington, across the country and internationally. If the wage-cutting deal is passed, it will set a precedent for attacks on other train, bus and ferry workers, among others.

Workers must recognise that they are in a struggle not only against Transdev and Hyundai Rotem—which are making billions of dollars in profits internationally—but

against the union bureaucracy, which functions as an enforcement agency on behalf of these corporations, the government and the council.

The National Party-led government and the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), which is run by the Labour Party and the Greens, are both seeking to impose austerity measures to make working people shoulder the full burden of the worsening economic crisis.

The statements by various council spokespeople expressing sympathy for rail workers are a sham. Transdev and Hyundai Rotem took over the running of trains in 2016 when the GWRC privatised the services, and the companies promised to deliver tens of millions of dollars in cost savings. The council, like others across New Zealand, is now preparing to increase passenger fares and scrap dozens of transport infrastructure projects across the region due to government funding cuts.

At the national level, Labour Party-led governments, backed by the Greens and the unions, have a long record of running down the rail network, keeping wages frozen and enabling giant corporations to extract profits from transport services.

To carry out a real fight against these attacks, the Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to take the struggle into their own hands and to break the stranglehold of the RMTU.

A rank-and-file committee must immediately be built—that is, an organisation controlled by workers themselves, not the parasitic bureaucracy that serves the interests of big business.

In opposition to the union's attempt to shut down discussion and stampede workers into voting for the pro-company sellout, a rank-and-file committee would fight for workers to hold mass meetings prior to any vote. It would provide a forum for workers to discuss and formulate their own demands, including for a pay increase that addresses their actual needs, not the profit-driven requirements of the companies and the council.

To make up for years of near-frozen wages, workers would need at least 20 percent. Workers should also oppose any increase to fares, which will impose further burdens on working people.

Such a committee would forge links with other sections of the working class to broaden the fight against wage cuts and attacks on working conditions.

This includes Auckland One Rail (AOR) workers, who are paid only slightly more than their Wellington counterparts. Last year the RMTU pushed through a pay increase of just 6.1 percent at AOR, spread over one-and-a-half years, which is effectively a pay freeze.

In opposition to the national divisions promoted by the unions, a rank-and-file committee would also fight to unify Transdev workers in New Zealand and Australia, where Sydney tram workers have taken industrial action after rejecting a pay-cutting offer.

Above all, the Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to link their struggle with the fight for the socialist reorganisation of society. This includes the demand for the nationalisation of all rail, bus and ferry services, under workers' control. The money required to rebuild and expand transport infrastructure and provide decent, high-paying jobs for all staff, must be obtained through the redistribution of wealth from the super-rich. The billions of dollars being squandered on expanding the military and the prison system should also be diverted into urgently needed social programs to raise workers' living standards.

We call on those who agree with this program to contact the Socialist Equality Group today.



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