Job cuts planned on Wellington, New Zealand rail network

Our correspondent
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Private company Transdev is planning a major reduction in staffing on the Wellington region's commuter rail network, using the introduction of cashless ticketing as the pretext to eliminate more than two-thirds of Passenger Operator (PO) positions.

The company released a "staff consultation" document on August 3 which stated that Metlink, the Greater Wellington Regional Council's (GWRC) transport arm, and Transdev were "facing ongoing financial pressures." To "operate more efficiently," they plan to reduce the current workforce of 78 POs to just 25 by July 2027, destroying 53 positions.

In a message to workers, Managing Director Tonia Haskell claimed that plans for a "cashless future" meant "we will need fewer onboard staff" to sell and check tickets. The company wants to discontinue 27 roles from September 1 by using a "sinking lid approach"—ending recruitment and encouraging staff to retire, quit, or take up unspecified "redeployment opportunities." A further 26 roles are to be cut from July 1, 2027.

From September 1, Transdev wants to reduce the standard number of POs on a four-car train from 1 to 0, leaving only one onboard staff member, the train manager (not counting the driver). The number of POs on rarer eight-car trains will be cut from 2 to 1. The initial cuts would apply to the Kapiti and Hutt Valley lines.

The second phase, from July 1, 2027, will discontinue 26 more positions by taking POs off six-car trains, leaving train managers (TMs) to run them alone. This poses a significant safety risk; currently a TM can only operate a six-car train alone by locking up two of the cars. The cuts would also be extended to the Johnsonville and Wairarapa lines.

A "consultation document" given to workers states that the first phase of cuts would implement minimum staffing levels outlined in the Multi-Employer Collective Agreement 2024-2027 (MECA), which was backed by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU). The MECA explicitly states that these minimum staffing levels should only apply "where staff unavailability or a disruption situation dictates" and "cannot be planned in advance." Transdev now proposes to make these lower levels the norm.

It is already common for a train manager to be the only staff member on a four-car service, and even on a six-car train, due to staff shortages. TMs have refused to run eight-car trains with just one PO. The planned cuts will place even greater responsibility and stress on TMs.

Most POs are part-time, on a minimum of 20 hours a week, and receive just $28.95 an hour, which is falsely promoted by the union leadership as a "living wage." Now, most of these workers face losing their jobs as unemployment in New Zealand continues to increase.

The GWRC intends to end cash payments on passenger rail services by March 2027. Transdev justifies its job cuts by pointing to figures that show cash sales onboard trains have declined, with more passengers using the electronic Snapper cards.

The discussion document claims that "a reduction in workload would be expected" due to cashless payments, even though it notes that POs will still be taking electronic payments.

Passenger Operators have never simply been ticket sellers. They assist Train Managers with passenger supervision and platform work, help customers with accessibility needs, and assist during emergencies and unexpected incidents. A single TM cannot simultaneously supervise an entire four- or six-car train while carrying out all their safety and operational responsibilities.

Haskell gave the real reason for the cuts in her statement that "Transdev Wellington continues to operate at a financial loss" and the change proposal "presents an opportunity to reduce those losses."

Transdev, which operates in 19 countries, does not publish specific financial results for its Wellington operation. In 2025, however, the global company reported an operating profit of €244 million ($NZ479 million).

The cost cutting drive is in line with the contract signed in 2016, when the GWRC privatised the operation of regional train services, outsourcing them to Transdev and Hyundai Rotem, which promised cost savings of $100 million over 15 years. This is being done at the expense of workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

Transdev claims that "no decisions have been made" and that staff cutbacks will have a "modest" impact. The restructuring timetable tells another story. Transdev began "consultation" on August 3, leaving just three weeks for "feedback from staff" (ending on August 24) before announcing a final decision on August 27.

The company's preferred mechanism is "natural attrition": a corporate euphemism for destroying positions without immediate compulsory redundancies. Transdev proposes vague "redeployment" of "capable and willing staff into other roles where opportunities exist." It did not specify any such "opportunities."

The planned elimination of 53 jobs has not been reported in the media. The RMTU has made no public statement, keeping the broader working class in the dark.

A union notice to Wellington train workers said a reduction in PO roles and onboard staffing was "unacceptable" and "is unsafe and creates risks to staff, passengers, and members of the public." It stated, however, that the RMTU "strongly opposes the changes proposed by Transdev *in their current form*" (emphasis added), leaving the door open for some other form of cuts to be negotiated.

A recent train crash near Khandallah station, which injured six people including two crew members, highlighted unsafe conditions on the network.

A union branch meeting is scheduled for August 19. No industrial action has been proposed. The union has called on members to submit examples of "the integral role that passenger operators fill in our work," which will be forwarded to Transdev "during the consultation process."

The union bureaucracy has a decades-long history of working hand-in-hand with management, the council and successive governments to suppress opposition to layoffs, wage stagnation and pro-corporate restructuring.

On July 15, 2018 Transdev discontinued 11 full-time Passenger Operator positions with workers taking "voluntary" redundancy or other rail jobs. The union assisted in the redundancy process.

In September 2024 the RMTU pushed through an agreement that increased wages for Wellington workers by just 4.7 percent in the first year, followed by two years of increases pegged to inflation—effectively a wage freeze.

The rail unions that preceded the RMTU opposed any mobilisation against the historic attacks on railway workers during the 1980s and 1990s. They accepted the demands by the 1984-1990 Labour Party government that the state-owned New Zealand Railways (NZR) had to be transformed into a profit-making business with the elimination of thousands of jobs.

An industrial and political campaign must be organised to stop the latest job cuts. Improved technology, such as cashless payment systems, should be used to improve conditions for passengers and staff—not as a pretext to slash jobs and increase corporate profits.

Workers should demand:

- No destruction of any Passenger Operator positions!
- No reduction in staffing!
- Increased staffing to fill current shortages!
- A substantial pay increase for all workers to meet the soaring cost of living.

Such a fight will only be carried out in a rebellion against the RMTU. Workers must build new organisations: rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers and independent of the union bureaucracy. These committees must fight to link Wellington rail workers with other public transport workers across NZ and with workers employed by Transdev in Australia and internationally, who are facing the same attacks.

The Trotskyist movement calls for the building of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite workers across borders, which is essential in the struggle against giant multinational corporations like Transdev and Hyundai Rotem.

The defence of rail jobs, wages and working conditions above all requires a political struggle against Labour and the Greens, which have leading positions in the GWRC, and all the parties in parliament, which support the subordination of public transport to corporate profit. We call on workers to contact and join the Socialist Equality Group, which fights for the abolition of capitalism and the reorganisation of society on the basis of socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact