

Rail union condemns TranzCoastal service withdrawal

Rail and Maritime Transport Union

Media release FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE Monday 4 April 2011 EMBARGOED UNTIL 8PM

The Rail and Maritime Transport Union has condemned the decision to suspend the TranzCoastal passenger service.

RMTU General Secretary Wayne Butson says the decision to mothball the Christchurch–Picton passenger service until 15 August 2011 was short sighted and bad business.

He says the withdrawal of the service for a few months was a false economy for KiwiRail and New Zealand.

The decision was inexplicable given the current economic situation and he called on the Government to step in to protect jobs and the fragile state of the Canterbury economy.

"The approach by KiwiRail management seems to be exactly the opposite of what is required to keep the Canterbury and New Zealand economy on track in a period of recovery from natural disaster and economic recession."

He says as a publicly owned enterprise, KiwiRail had a responsibility to manage its way through the current economic situation without disrupting or reducing operations.

"Many of our Christchurch based members are going to have to take leave, until the service comes back on. This would be bad enough at the best of times, but in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake it is simply unacceptable."

"People simply can't put their lives on hold to suit ad hoc decisions by management."

Mr Butson says the effect on workers, the local economy and New Zealand's tourist reputation was hard to quantify.

He says pulling the service and then reintroducing it in August will undermine the viability of the service and the credibility of KiwiRail.

"It starts to make New Zealand look like a developing country. Will tourists be interested in booking a service that is being pulled off the market then put back on? From a marketing perspective it is a disaster."

The RMTU has also questioned Kiwirail's statement that they will be looking for "investment partners" for the TranzCoastal service, saying this appeared to be a euphemism for privatization.

"All of this has been tried in the past and failed. The TranzScenic service was privatised and purchased by Australian operator West Coast Rail, but it didn't work and Toll had to reabsorb it back into the business."

Mr Butson says the withdrawal of the TranzCoastal service is a health and safety issue for staff as well.

Staff such as locomotive engineers on freight trains will now be forced to drive long distances back to their home base, a situation that has resulted in deaths from vehicle accidents in the past.

ENDS

For more information, contact RMTU General Secretary Wayne Butson on 0274962461