



RAIL ACTIVIST ALERT

Kiwirail Networks Cost Reduction Plan: Roadshow Report

It would be fair to say that Rick van Barneveld's description of the Infrastructure and Engineering (I&E) cost reduction roadshow, as "expressed" in the company newsletter is far more polished than his actual performance in front of his staff has been, then again having the use of a well oiled public relations machine is certainly handy, when it comes to generating spin. The content of his article has all the hallmarks of well-crafted PR spin.

The picture being painted in the article attributed to Rick is a picture of stoic railway workers gritting their teeth in the face of economic challenges and job cuts, but underneath it all, they understand it, and begrudgingly accept it. That is nonsense.

Having attended all but one of the north island meetings, I can say from my own observations that the message being spun in this Express article does not reflect the feedback I saw and have been receiving. Rick has chosen not to mention the very pointed and concerned questions put to him, nor has he mentioned the hostility our members are feeling about the approach he and the company are taking. Rick also chose not to mention that he had to ask permission from his staff to enter his own depot in Hamilton because they had erected a picket reflecting their grave concern at his actions.

It is interesting to watch managers who are so convinced that they are right, that they mistake courtesy for acquiescence. This is a fundamental mistake on their part.

They are not right, and there is no acquiescence.

I do agree with Rick that there is a need to “keep things in perspective” and that perspective includes a number of very clear points that have been made at these meetings. These points will come to rest on Rick’s desk as inevitable outcomes of this plan if he continues to proceed as he has indicated he will. They include issues that Rick has assured his staff will not occur, but are inevitable if he proceeds.

- It is inevitable that this plan **will** compromise safety.
- It is inevitable that this plan **will** lead to the loss of core skills needed to maintain and expand the network. The numbers signalled are not a “cutting of the cloth”; they are cutting into the bone.
- It is inevitable that this plan and the job losses it envisaged **will** lead to a collapse in moral and a loss of trust in the ability of the current management to maintain the network, and lead this company forward.

What the KiwiRail workers are essentially saying is that grand plans hatched in the railway station in Wellington by people with pocket calculators cannot be translated into assurances over issues like how safe the network will be with between 25-30% less staff. This employer has statutory obligations for health and safety – it has a MECA with the RMTU which reinforces those obligations; it can also go back and read the report from the last Commission of Inquiry into its health and safety failings. Rick’s plans are inconsistent with these obligations, and Rick’s plan will cause great harm, if it proceeds.

The RMTU has been running secret ballots at all of these meetings, testing the real views of KiwiRail Networks staff over Rick’s plan. These results will give the genuine feeling of those workers and will be conveyed to the company management when we meet.

One last point that Rick should consider relates to the concerns over privatisation, the prime minister didn’t “chime in to discount the possibility” he said they had no plans for privatisation. That is a completely different thing.

Scott Wilson

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