

Reject RMT's attempt to isolate rail strikes ***Mobilize all rail workers against job losses, wage freezes*** ***and productivity drives!***

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

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Railway workers now entering struggles to protect jobs and services must reject attempts by the National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers (RMT) to keep them divided and isolated. The actions developing across the UK must be unified and based on an opposed perspective to that being promoted by the trade union bureaucracy.

The Train Operating Companies (TOCs) have made it clear they will impose the economic crisis onto rail workers and the traveling public. They are testing the reaction of workers to this round of job losses in preparation for even greater job losses and attacks on wages and conditions.

The proposed job losses include at least 800 at Network Rail, 750 at National Express Group in eastern England, and 660 at South West Trains. The UK's biggest rail-freight operator, Deutsche Bahn Schenker (formerly English Welsh & Scottish Rail), is demanding at least 660 job losses and Southeastern trains 300; 40 workers are to go at First Scotrail and over 20 at First Capital Connect.

The Department of Transport has announced that five of the 19 TOC franchises are in a perilous state, including the National Express Group which has an operating loss of £26 million. Probably the most disturbing news is Network Rail's plans to postpone 28 percent of its track renewal programme, which has serious implications for the safety of staff and the traveling public.

Most of the companies are trying to negotiate significant reductions in services with the Labour government and get its agreement to protect their profits. Govia which runs the London Midland, South Eastern, Southern and Gatwick Express networks has agreed a "revenue support mechanism" in which the government will make up most of any revenue shortfalls in 2010.

Workers at many of the TOCs are balloting on strike action, as are those at Tyne & Wear Metro which is threatened with privatisation. Retail staff at C2C have already been involved in strike action and London Midland conductors are about to be.

The RMT is an active participant in these cutbacks. Its officials have been in backroom negotiations with the TOCs. Despite their occasional radical outbursts, they have limited the strikes to demands to drop threats of compulsory redundancies and adhere to procedures that have been used for the "orderly" destruction of thousands of jobs before and after privatisation in 1996. The union also calls for workers to engage in the fruitless task of writing to their local Members of Parliament, the RMT's group of Labour MPs and government ministers.

The RMT denounces anyone who opposes this perspective, claiming it undermines the "united front" against the employers and contravenes the anti-trade union laws. The bureaucracy is prepared to call off industrial action and act against rail workers who show any signs of taking strikes into their own hands.

This is what happened at Deutsche Bahn Schenker/EW&S. When workers at its South Yorkshire depots demanded action they were faced with a "work when required" scheme where they had to be available from 7pm to 7am but only paid for the time worked. The RMT called a strike ballot but only so as to get the government to intervene and put pressure on the company to stick to agreed procedures.

The RMT refuses to campaign for the unity of British and German workers who are fighting the threat of privatisation and initiated a thinly veiled anti-German campaign that attacked Deutsche Bahn for striving for "world domination", combined with a call for a defence of British economic interests against foreign

competition. The drivers union ASLEF has split Schenker/EW&S workers by negotiating separately to find drivers jobs at other TOCs.

At London Midland, conductors are set to strike on March 13 and 16 at Watford, Bletchley and Northampton depots after a 90 percent vote to oppose enforced Sunday working and changes to overtime rates. The RMT has refused to involve conductors at other London Midland depots, saying it would contravene the anti-trade union laws. When conductors turned down overtime in the period leading up to the ballot, RMT regional officer Ken Usher issued a letter that agreed with company claims that the action constituted unofficial industrial action and disassociated the union from the workers. A number of local union officials threatened with legal action caved in and volunteered for overtime to prove to the company they were not acting illegally.

TSSA union members in managerial and supervisory grades have been intimidated into training as conductors for three days on a course, which normally takes months, to run trains during the strikes. While not calling explicitly for scabbing, TSSA has reminded its members that they must not break contracts of employment stating they are required to do any duties they are trained for. The union is now set to ballot members over the dispute, but this process could take weeks.

When First Capital Connect workers displayed petitions in ticket office windows urging commuters to complain about plans to axe jobs and close offices at certain times of the day, managers threatened them with the sack. Each worker received a letter saying they were under contractual duty to “promote FCC’s commercial interests and not put themselves in a position where this duty and their personal interests may conflict”.

An FCC spokesman added, “The TSSA leadership agreed with FCC that sending such communication while staff are on duty and in uniform is inappropriate and have asked their members to cease such activity.”

Bob Crow’s election as general secretary of the RMT in 2001 was a result of opposition to New Labour amongst rail workers. A former member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, he was one of a new layer of officials dubbed the “awkward squad” by the media. Left groups such as the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party hailed this development as the start of a revival of militant trade unionism. Instead, since then the RMT has repeatedly called-off strikes at the last minute and overturned ballots for action. At first, the RMT sought to put pressure on the Labour leaders by withholding union funds and giving money to other left groups. Now, in the midst of a worsening economic crisis, Crow has declared that calls for a new party should be put on the back burner to focus on promoting a charter of minimal demands on Labour and the unions.

Workers must reject this perspective. The Labour Party has been fully transformed into the direct political instrument for imposing the dictates of global capital. As for the unions, they are no longer workers’ organisations in any genuine sense of the term. They function as the appendages of management and the state, championing the need for “sacrifices”.

Workers are not responsible for the capitalist crisis and must oppose any attempts to make them pay for it. The first priority is the defence of all jobs and the rejection of any calls for wage cuts and greater exploitation. Committees must be established that function independently of the trade unions, establish contact with other factories and workforces in the UK, Europe and the world.

The principled defence of all jobs must become the starting point of a political offensive aimed at establishing a workers’ government. Such a government would expropriate the rail network and other major concerns, subject them to democratic control and place them at the service of society as a whole. Such a government would divert the billions donated by the Brown government to the banks for the reorganisation of the entire economy and the creation of millions of jobs. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.