Rail workers strike throughout Europe against deregulation

Robert Stevens
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Rail workers in Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece took strike action yesterday in protest against European Union proposals to deregulate and privatise the European freight rail system.

Virtually all rail traffic ground to a halt in Belgium and only one-third of services ran in France. Trains in and around Paris were most affected by the dispute. Motorways were packed with cars in the Paris region as commuters used other forms of transport to and from work. The French national rail operator SNCF reported that only 280 of 680 scheduled trains would run in the Northwest of the country. Routes from the Northwest to the Southwest, Southeast and the east coast were heavily disrupted by the strike.

No trains were due to run from France to Belgium and the Thalys train service from France to Amsterdam, Holland and Cologne, Germany were cancelled due to the strike action.

One in three Channel Tunnel services did not run and London-Brussels service was suspended for 24 hours. The Eurostar Channel Tunnel London-Paris shuttle was not affected by the dispute.

Trains were severely disrupted in Greece where no services operated in Athens or in Thessalonika. In Lisbon, Portugal train drivers struck from 1600-1700 GMT. Services were also hit in Luxembourg.

The 24-hour day of action began on Sunday evening and was called by the Brussels-based European Federation of Transport Unions (FST). The dispute was called following the announcement of proposals by the European Commission intended to open up a quarter of the rail freight market to competition over the next decade and to end the system of state control over freight. The Commission is recommending that 5 percent of the freight network in the 15 European Union (EU) member states be opened up to private companies immediately.

Measures being proposed by the EU include allocating train routes and operating licences to private rail companies. The EU also proposes to charge the train operators to use the railway infrastructure (tracks and stations, etc.)

The changes would require EU countries establish independent rail regulators who would decide a price structure so that private freight firms would be charged to run freight or passengers over their rail tracks.

The FST has warned that deregulation poses the threat of further job losses and an assault on safety conditions.

The union federation, however, is not opposed in principle to the European rail freight system competing against road haulage and airfreight rivals. Sabine Trier, the spokeswoman for the FST, said that what was need was 'fairer' competition and complained that road hauliers did not face the same costs as rail freight. 'Social dumping in the road sector is distorting competition. Rail and road use charges do not reflect environmental costs,' she added. Trier said that rail freight firms had to improve efficiency, particularly on international routes, and that companies had to co-operate closely with unions to achieve this.

An example of this co-operation was the trade union demobilisation of a threatened strike by British Eurostar drivers last week. After setting the dates for four days of industrial action ASLEF, the train drivers union, called off the dispute. Eurostar drivers had demanded a substantial pay raise from approximately £17,200 to £24,000 per year. The union accepted a derisory pay offer by the company, Eurotunnel, bringing drivers' salaries to £18,700.

The FST is calling on EU ministers to vote against the proposals at the next monthly meeting on

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November 30. All European Transport Ministers, with the exception of France, already stated their agreement with the deregulation proposals in September. The Europe Transport Commissioner, ex-British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, said that deregulation was the only way to stop 'the haemorrhage of jobs' throughout Europe. 'Half a million jobs have been lost in the rail industry of Europe in the last 15 years, not because of the implementation of strategies to increase competitiveness but because of the absence of such strategies and the resulting loss of customers.'

Warning of the changes to come, Kinnock continued, 'the strategy does pose major challenges to the conventional culture and practice of the rail industry and to the traditional policies of some governments. But it has to be so because the choice for rail is stark: it is between rising to the challenge of the changes proposed or being pushed to the margins of existence by the intensifying challenge of road transport.'

Rail job losses over the past 15 years have been primarily the result of downsizing in the run-up to the Single European Market and European Monetary Union. The falling cost of passenger and freight transportation, not only in Europe but also internationally, has intensified competition throughout the transport sector. The EU is seeking to privatise this sector in preparation for an escalation of this trade war in the aftermath of the Single European Market.

In a separate development, 300 train drivers in Ireland are due to take a one-day unofficial strike today, halting services on the mainline railway and the DART network throughout the republic.

The drivers are taking action following the lack of progress in talks between unions and Éireann, the Irish rail company. The discussions are based on the company's viability plan. A spokesman for the drivers said, 'This is a protest based on the remarks of the chairman last week and the fact that Irish Rail are not treating the negotiations seriously. They are heading towards the Labour Court. If that is the case we have been wasting our time talking to them for the last two years. We feel we are being led down the garden path.'

The National Locomotive Drivers Union, representing 120 of the drivers, has refused to support the dispute and condemned the unofficial action. The chairman of the union, Brendan Ogle, said that the strike would do 'irreparable damage' and that 'we urge all train drivers to behave with professionalism and dignity at all times and not to engage in disreputable tactics'.

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