

Britain's rail union calls off national conductors strike

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The Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) called off a national one-day strike due Friday. In a national ballot of 6,000 conductors, 86 percent had voted in favour of strike action against the decision by the 25 Train Operating Companies (TOCs) to remove the safety role of conductors during train failures.

This means that, in future accidents, train safety will be the sole preserve of the driver. This ruling is particularly significant after the recent Paddington crash, which killed over 30 people—including both drivers—and injured 200. Since the crash it has emerged that the conductor, acting under the previous regulations, prevented more trains ploughing into the crash site. Despite this, Railtrack, prompted by the TOCs, have enforced the changes in the rulebook withdrawing train protection from the conductor. Rail workers see the move as preparation for removing the safety function of the conducting grade altogether.

Virgin Trains boss Richard Branson and two other operating companies led a legal challenge to the strike. They claimed their profits would be affected unduly by action against a policy introduced by the track and signalling company Railtrack and not them. Under anti-strike legislation introduced by the previous Conservative government and kept in place by Labour, such "secondary action" is illegal. The court upheld the challenge and the strike was declared illegal. The RMT will not lodge an appeal.

Under conditions where a groundswell of opinion throughout the country was demanding safety before profit and the renationalisation of the railways, the RMT had an opportunity to drive forward the defence of safety. Many conductors believe that the strike should have gone ahead, regardless of the judges ruling, convinced the public was with them. Some have attacked the union for ignoring the safety of union

members and the public.

In many regions in the south of England and Scotland, driver-only trains have already been introduced and other areas are preparing to do so. A pilot project being run on the Leeds to Doncaster line leaves nearly all freight trains with no guard (conductor). In 1988 the RMT's predecessor, the National Union of Railwaymen, signed the Traincrew Agreement which changed the job description from guard to conductor. This has led to a vast increase in retail duties and undermined the safety role of the workers.

In 1997 the RMT participated in a joint working party on the role of conductors with Railtrack, the TOC's and the Railway Inspectorate, where the present proposals were made. In May 1997 *RMT News* commented, "The initiative came from the operators but the working party came under the wing of Railtrack. The main thrust of the working party's report is to shift the emphasis away from the present primary function of the guard, which is to maintain a safe system of operation, to one which will mean other duties." The article describes the changes as "significant reductions in safety on the train."

This makes clear that the TOCs initiated the working party discussions on the role of the conductor. Railtrack then introduced the proposals, as the body responsible for railway safety. Even with clear evidence that contradicts Branson's injunction, the union has refused to appeal the decision. The union's reason for not doing so is political. The strike would have brought the RMT into conflict with the Labour government at a particularly sensitive time in the aftermath of Paddington. More specifically it would have focussed attention on the union's endorsing of Labour's policies for the rail network and its refusal to reverse the

Conservatives' privatisation of the industry.

The RMT and train drivers union ASLEF have worked side by side with official inquiries into a growing number of major crashes, many of which have highlighted the impact of privatisation in undermining rail safety. In the last weeks, attention has focused on the issue of Automatic Train Protection (ATP). There are other questions like the deterioration of track maintenance, faulty signalling and the replacement of double tracks with single and bi-directional track systems. For the ATP system to be most effective, the profitable exploitation of the lines has to be removed and safe systems of track layout introduced.

In television discussions on the Paddington crash, rail workers were forced to appear in silhouette to avoid intimidation for speaking out about safety. Under their employment contract they are prevented from criticising the rail companies. The unions have never challenged this, while the government's answer has been to propose a "secret telephone hotline" which leaves the ban unchanged.

In the past conductors had the authority to refuse a train that they regarded as unsafe. On Regional Railways Northeast, RMT officials accepted new company rosters eliminating all conductors' responsibilities for depot work. The result is that trains now operate with numerous faults, which in the past would have been repaired or the train taken out of service. This has been repeated throughout the country.

Since the Paddington crash, spokesmen for the RMT and ASLEF have insisted that drivers' working hours are too long and affect safety. But in 1997, they agreed a package with the TOCs which extended working hours. The present secretary of ASLEF, Mick Rix, travelled throughout his own region (Northeast) with a joint union/company "road show." Its purpose was to convince drivers to accept the restructuring proposals.

The proposals extended drivers shift lengths to 10 hours, with Sunday becoming part of the normal working week. Some drivers are now working between nine and 10 hours for 10 consecutive days. The deal contained a commitment to work a 41-hour week, with a maximum roster of 63 hours in a seven-day period.

ASLEF threatened all-out strike action if the Labour government did not address the issue of safety within a week of the Paddington crash. RMT representatives even went so far as to call for the renationalisation of

the railways. The wrecking of the train guards' dispute before it even got underway gives the lie to any such pretence of opposition amongst the union bureaucracy.



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