

Britain hit by rail strikes

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10 January 2002

Industrial action affecting Britain's rail services is escalating, causing serious disruption on many routes.

Two thousand members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) employed by South West Trains (SWT) have already held two 48-hour strikes, setting up picket lines outside Waterloo Station in London, the company's main terminus. Only 200 trains out of a possible 1,700 were running during the strike.

In Scotland, unofficial action by 750 ScotRail drivers caused the cancellation of one in four services. On Wednesday, it was announced that RMT members at Arriva Trains North (ATN), which covers most of Northern England, had voted to hold a 48-hour stoppage starting on January 24 along with their colleagues at SWT. A second 48-hour stoppage is planned for February 5.

The strikes all centre on divisive pay awards made to different groups of workers in the privatised rail network. The breaking up of a unified system of wages and conditions was a key element in the previous Conservative government's privatisation of British Rail. Under-investment has caused severe staff shortages and compromised rail safety—leading to a number of fatal crashes. Anger has been growing amongst rail employees, as they are forced to bear the brunt of travellers' dissatisfaction when scheduled services are cancelled.

Arriva guards voted by 429 to 28 to take industrial action in an effort to achieve pay parity with drivers. Last year, the company was forced to award a 17 percent pay increase to its drivers, in an effort to stop them being poached by other train operators. The company was also forced to introduce a restricted emergency service, after losing drivers to Great North Eastern Railways (GNER), and was fined £2 million by the Strategic Rail Authority for failing to maintain its services.

The action by ScotRail drivers is also aimed at

achieving parity with drivers on other suburban operators. For the five years since privatisation, drivers have been encouraged by both the rail unions and ScotRail management to work extra days to plug the holes in the company's timetable caused by chronic understaffing. Their refusal to work rest days has therefore led to the cancellation of trains.

Industrial action by train managers on the cross-channel Eurostar network was halted last week when the company secured a court injunction. The pay gap between the far more poorly-paid train managers and the Eurostar drivers has increased from £6,000 (\$8,600) to £17,000 (\$24,500) a year since the company began operating.

The action by SWT workers involves two disputes. In the first, a 75 percent majority voted for strike action over a pay demand for non-driver staff dating back to April 2001. SWT had originally offered a four percent increase to the non-driver staff, half the amount it had offered to its drivers. Following the first 48-hour strike last week, the company claims it offered the staff a 7.6 percent pay increase over two years—as opposed to the 18-month deal agreed with the drivers—on condition there was no further strike action. But RMT acting General Secretary Vernon Hince rejected SWT's claim, stating, "We had no offer whatsoever on pay, no negotiations in relation to pay. We have nothing on the table, not even the four percent that was offered way back last year. Our members now have had no pay increase since April 2000."

The second dispute involves disciplinary action taken by SWT against Greg Tucker and six other union safety reps. Some 56 percent of SWT drivers voted to strike after Tucker, an experienced train driver, was victimised by management after standing as a candidate for the Socialist Alliance, an electoral coalition of leftwing groups, in last year's General Election. The charges against him included exceeding the speed limit

by five miles-an-hour for less than a minute, when decelerating from a 100 to a 90 mph speed limit. Tucker was downgraded to ticket inspector and his salary cut in half. Another driver and safety rep, Sarah Friday, whom Tucker had replaced, was then also victimised and sacked two years ago by SWT. Friday was never reinstated, even though the industrial tribunal found she had been unfairly dismissed.

The rail companies are taking a belligerent attitude towards the disputes. SWT has stated it intends to impose its latest pay offer, whilst ScotRail has offered just three percent, far below the 22 percent increase being demanded. The company has also introduced a provocative emergency timetable, intended to isolate the drivers by cancelling over 500 services daily, far more than would be cancelled because of their rest-day ban, and announcing that the timetable will remain in force for up to six weeks.

The rail disputes threaten a political crisis for the Blair government. Fresh from his latest public relations exercise—a 50-minute visit to an airport hanger in Afghanistan that made him the first Western leader to visit the country since US bombing began—the prime minister is facing a mountain of criticism at home. The media speaks scathingly of Blair attempting to bestride the international scene as a great statesman, whilst at home his government is unable to run a rail network. The press is demanding the sacking of Transport Secretary Stephen Byers, whilst the Conservative Party has called on the government to intervene directly to end the rail disputes.

Publicly, the government has said it will not intervene, but a report in the *Guardian* newspaper January 9 revealed that it had made secret efforts to intervene via Labour MP Keith Hill, a former political officer of the RMT. According to the newspaper, “a senior industry figure said Mr Hill offered a ‘non-traceable’ channel between Whitehall and SWT”. Hill reportedly urged SWT to simply impose the 7.6 percent offer, a move subsequently taken by the company and which caused the union to threaten further action.



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