

Britain: Train drivers union leader threatens mass sackings and union busting

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Office workers employed at the London headquarters of the train drivers' union, the Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), have voted overwhelmingly to strike against their employer. The staff, members of the General Municipal Boilermakers Union (GMB), fear that restructuring plans for the union headquarters will mean job losses and the introduction of short-term contracts.

ASLEF's newly-elected general secretary Shaun Brady reacted to the decision to ballot for industrial action by threatening to use anti-trade union laws implemented under the former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and maintained by the present Blair Labour government.

Brady, who describes himself as a "proud Blairite", was elected in July 2003 and took up his post in October. He defeated Mick Rix by approximately 1,200 votes. Rix, a nominal left, accepted his defeat and merely commented, "I have been proud to serve ASLEF members as their general secretary for the last five years, and I wish them and the union every success for the future... I will be cheering the union on from the sidelines."

According to press reports, the conflict between Brady and headquarters' staff erupted only two days into his tenure, when he moved time-served staff into different posts without consultation. Staff have lodged complaints of "harassment and bullying," blaming this for a number of workers taking sick leave due to stress. Employees report having been visited in their homes whilst on sick leave and being threatened with punishment if they did not return to work.

Brady has threatened to challenge the legality of the ballot through the courts. Earlier in the dispute GMB officials reported that they had been refused an emergency workplace meeting with their members.

Brady accuses the staff of being part of a conspiracy organised by the ousted general secretary Mick Rix, whose supporters retain a majority on the union's national executive: "I believe a small number of supporters of the former general secretary are hell bent on disrupting the work of this union and have seized upon the difficulties I have experienced in trying to keep the office running as an excuse to engineer a strike."

One employee responded by telling the *Guardian*, "This is not a political battle with the new general secretary. We are professional staff who will serve whoever is elected but things have been done that are unacceptable."

On October 23, staff met to discuss organising a strike ballot. Brady responded by writing to the office workers and threatening a legal challenge against the ballot, cuts to sick pay and holidays and the withdrawal of flexitime and childcare vouchers. He has also threatened to derecognise the GMB and to replace it with a "professional association".

Referring to the current anti-trade union legislation his letter stated, "After eight weeks and one day all staff who have participated in the dispute will be dismissed and during the dispute ASLEF will advertise and employ alternative staff to cover the work... They will not be GMB members and if the ballot goes ahead I will begin this process immediately. Simultaneously I will begin interviewing for replacement staff. They will be offered individual contracts, all collective agreements will be rescinded and terms and conditions, including salaries, will be different from those in place now."

Paul Kenny, the GMB London secretary, accused Brady of acting unlawfully and attempting to create a "trade union free zone". "The letter is threatening to

use all of the Tory employment legislation, including the pieces ASLEF and the TUC [Trade Union Congress] oppose,” Kenny said. “He’s obviously been getting a lot of advice from rogue employers, attempting to bully staff prior to a ballot. They will have great difficulty saying anything to any employer who issues these threats against train drivers in future.”

Brady has appointed Lew Adams, the former right-wing ASLEF general secretary who was ousted by Rix five years before, as his main adviser. Adams is a senior director in the Labour government’s recently formed Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) and is a highly paid consultant to a number of private train operating companies. The SRA was formed after a wave of public criticism following a series devastating rail crashes that were widely attributed to the profiteering of private railway companies. Although it has the power to cancel franchises and impose fines, in practice it has failed to withdraw a single franchise and has only imposed derisory fines and verbal warnings.

According to the *Guardian*, Brady’s letter to staff claimed that Rix “imposed staff changes during his final days in office in October to frustrate his successor.” Neither Rix nor his supporters have as yet made any public statement. The GMB and ASLEF have been summoned to a meeting with the Trade Union Congress (TUC) on January 26. The GMB and the TUC want to avoid strike action by getting an agreement that Brady’s threats are withdrawn. A spokesman for the GMB told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they hope that this will “get things back to normal.”



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