

RMT union sabotages London Midland rail dispute

Paul Barnes
6 April 2009

The current dispute on London Midland trains is a classic example of how the National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) uses divide and rule tactics to split rail workers facing attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

Last week, the RMT called off coordinated strikes at London Midland and two other train operating companies (TOCs). It is trying to prevent action elsewhere that could develop into a united offensive against the employers and threaten the Labour government.

- At London Midland the RMT suspended a conductors' strike after the company mounted a legal challenge.
- At First Capital Connect the union called off a strike, claiming there had been "significant progress" in negotiations with the company on booking office closures.
- A similar situation occurred at National Express East Anglia.
- At London Overground workers voted on March 17 by ten to one for strikes, but the RMT entered negotiations with the company.
- At London Underground where 3,000 job losses are threatened only 10,000 workers out of a total workforce of 28,000 will be balloted for strike action.

For years, the union bureaucracy has been negotiating away the terms and conditions of rail workers. At London Midland, workers explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* that they had to force the union to call a ballot on the company's latest attempt to bring in compulsory Sunday working.

Over the last eight years, the company has slipped into the contracts of newly employed conductors a clause "expecting" them to work rostered Sundays, even though Sunday is not part of the working week, and has disciplined those who refused. Some conductors (and drivers) have not only been working up to thirty hours enforced overtime a month on weekdays, but have also had to work Sunday shifts of between nine and ten hours.

The company then put out a new roster involving an

increase in enforced overtime. At first, local RMT union representatives told workers to ignore the new roster and keep to the existing one. However, on the last day before the deadline for agreement the RMT signed off on the new roster, which meant an enormous increase in working time, potentially up to sixty hours a week.

The situation became intolerable for many workers who were finishing shifts, eating their dinners and going straight to sleep day after day. They demanded a ballot for industrial action.

In the run up to the ballot, many refused to volunteer for additional overtime. The train service was impacted dramatically, including significant cancellations of trains. London Midland management immediately accused staff of engaging in unofficial action and threatened legal action against the RMT unless it told workers to work overtime.

The RMT duly obliged. Local officials posted a threatening letter dated December 12 written by RMT regional officer Ken Usher warning conductors that withdrawing from overtime in the run-up to a ballot either "collectively" or "individually" essentially constituted unofficial action. Usher said the company was well within its rights to dismiss anyone who refused to work overtime.

The company then put pressure on local RMT officials threatening them for inciting unofficial strike action—for which there was no evidence—and demanding they enforce the new roster. All but one volunteered to work overtime.

When the RMT eventually announced a ballot for strike action, it was restricted to just three depots—Northampton, Bletchley and Watford. The union said that involving conductors at other London Midland depots not directly affected by the new roster would contravene the anti-trade union laws.

Workers at the three depots voted 90 percent in favour of strike action. Once again, the union tried to prevent the strike going ahead, holding an "avoidance of dispute" meeting with London Midland and presenting staff with a "revised" agreement that still retained the enforced Sunday working clause. It was overwhelmingly rejected at a mass

meeting.

On the night before the strikes were announced, RMT executive member Mick Lynch came to the union meeting. He expressed surprise at the size of the vote and said that because the strike was “different”—the workers and not the union had initiated the call for ballots—the workers would have to conduct the strikes themselves. He said the union would give “practical” support, i.e., flags and posters. Lynch urged the conductors to trust Ken Usher because he was an experienced negotiator who would get them “a good deal”. When challenged, Lynch admitted that Usher had told the RMT executive he opposed strikes and wanted to keep the dispute under his control and conduct “private negotiations” with London Midland.

After months of delays, the first strikes took place on March 13-16, but they were restricted to two 24-hour strikes. Virtually all the conductors turned up to the picket line showing their determination to resist the company and the attempts of the union to isolate the dispute. The RMT worked to rehabilitate Usher in the eyes of the workers, fronting him on news reports as a proponent of the strike and demanding unity behind the union.

The strikers received significant support from passengers and workers from the area who are witnessing the effects of the global capitalist crisis in factory closures and job losses. This support made virtually no impact on the RMT officials present, but when a local Tory MP, whose main complaints were that the strike breakers had had only three days training (it usually takes months) and that public safety was being threatened, came over they fawned all over him.

That the company had been able to train the strike breakers at all was due to the RMT’s delaying tactics and the complicity of the white collar Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA), of which the strike breakers are members. The TSSA had allowed the company ample time to intimidate staff into acting as strike breakers and warned them that their contracts of employment included a clause requiring them to do any job for which they had received training. Under pressure from managers and supervisors, the TSSA was forced to call its own ballot (but only for action short of strikes) and only after the conductors strike began. No doubt the bureaucracy hoped that by the time the result of the TSSA ballot was announced the RMT would have forced the conductors back to work.

The train drivers’ union ASLEF (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen) played a similar role. Prior to the strikes ASLEF issued a letter reminding drivers they were not in dispute with London Midland and it was down to them as individuals if they wanted to honour the picket lines. Despite this a number refused to cross picket lines. It should be noted that, far from the conductors’

dispute being of no concern to drivers, those newly recruited are being forced to sign contracts that contain the same “expected” to work Sunday clause. Instead of joining the strikes ASLEF has agreed with the company a £50-an-hour rate for drivers working Sundays.

On March 19, London Midland managing director Stephen Banaghan issued a letter warning that the company would revise its “current depot strategy” if the strikes continued. A clear majority of conductors favoured extending the strikes and coordinating them with strikes planned at First Capital Connect and National Express East Anglia for the end of March. However, on the same day London Midland received notification of the strikes, the RMT called them off.

According to local RMT officials, Assistant General Secretary Pat Sikorski (a former leader of the British section of the Pabloite United Secretariat) said there had been an administrative error and that he hoped workers would not conclude the union was not supporting the strike. However, the same day the strike was called off the RMT urged the company to resume negotiations even though London Midland had stated they would not budge on Sunday working.

On March 30, London Midland and the RMT published new proposals but once again enforced Sunday working was included. Instead of presenting the proposals to mass meetings, London Midland paid union officials to talk to workers individually. Even so, the new proposals were overwhelmingly rejected. Once again, London Midland has used the intervening time to train up more strike breakers.

A new strike is currently taking place, but the conductors will be striking alone. RMT officials are continuing attempts to isolate them, issuing instructions for there to be no pickets on Sunday April 5, thus restricting the opportunity for workers to discuss the issues and put forward their own proposals.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact