

Strike at National Express East Anglia

Britain: Rail unions prevent national struggle

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Members of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) are striking Thursday and Friday this week to oppose a pay freeze by National Express East Anglia.

National Express, a Train Operating Company (TOC), has shed 750 jobs this year alone.

The RMT's paltry demand of a 2.5 percent pay rise has been rejected by the company as "totally unrealistic." Other TOCs are delaying wage offers, waiting for the outcome of this confrontation.

In the face of this coordinated attack by the employers, supported by the Labour government, the rail unions continue to ballot separately and oppose a unified response throughout the network.

RMT members voted 90 percent for strike action and ASLEF by 95 percent. This week's strike follows overwhelming votes for strike action by drivers at East Midlands Trains, whose planned strikes were suspended just before today's action. Workers at Arriva Cross Country are engaged in actions short of strikes.

A series of ballots are also underway at London Midland and other parts of the network. This follows strikes by conductors at London Midland, track maintenance, London Underground and rail engineers over the last few months.

The Association of Train Operating Companies is spearheading an offensive to recoup profits; meanwhile the government has announced plans to cut £29 billion from the transport budget over a 10-year period. Earlier this year the TOCs announced across the board redundancies, testing out rail workers' reactions to an initial phase of job losses and productivity drives.

The National Express group's East Coast Mainline

franchise is in turmoil and the company could lose it in December. The group announced in July that its subsidiary had run out of money and could not pay its charges to the government for the franchise. They will be allowed to walk away from a major rail artery on which millions depend because, a short time into the seven-year franchise, their anticipated profits are down and long-term projections have also been revised downward due to the recession.

According to reports, National Express (NX) are set to exploit a clause in their contract allowing them to pay £74 million and leaving the treasury to pick up the bill for a franchise standing at £1.4 billion. According to the RMT, NX over the last ten years made £500 million in profits and received £2.5 billion in state subsidies whilst being accused of serious breaches in safety and hygiene. Transport Minister Paul Clark had warned National Express East Coast that "a major accident is just around the corner," a leaked memo revealed, citing trains operating with faulty brakes, as well as passengers "poisoned" by dirty coffee machines.

NX has refused to hand over the other two franchises it operates—NX East Anglia and C2C. It has threatened to take the government to court if their remaining franchise contracts are overturned and is considering a legal battle to hold onto the East Coast franchise. As with the bankers, they utterly refuse to pay for a crisis of their making.

The whole rotten edifice of privatisation is beginning to crumble. The Department of Transport has warned that at least five of the nineteen franchises are in a perilous state.

The rail unions welcomed the government's temporary takeover of East Coast mainline as a victory over privatisation, while the RMT threatened to launch

strikes if there were moves to restore it to the private sector. It has pinned great hopes on winning the support of a handful of rebel Labour MPs.

However, even before National Express is removed in December, the government is already seeking a private takeover of the franchise. The Parliamentary Select Committee into the state of the franchise system has urged extending private franchises for up to twenty years!

Prior to Labour being elected in 1997, it was pledged to re-nationalising the railways privatised by the Conservatives only one year earlier. There was not a single strike against privatisation by the unions. Instead the rail unions collaborated at every stage in the restructuring of the railways, forcing through tens of thousands of job losses and changes to working conditions that facilitated private operators entering the market.

In 2003 when Connex lost its other franchises, the RMT launched a campaign to show that the franchise should be kept in the public sector. The government re-privatised it as soon as taxpayers' money had once again made it a potential profitable enterprise.

Since March rail unions have offered their services in cutting jobs as long as they are not compulsory. Strikes have been repeatedly called off, citing either the anti-union laws or a phony "breakthrough" in negotiations.

The London Midland conductors' strikes earlier this year to resist enforced Sunday working was called off by the RMT, using a dubious consultation procedure. As a result, Sunday working remains in the contracts of the majority of conductors at affected depots. During the dispute, the Transport Salaried Staff Association allowed its members to be used as scabs, working as conductors with only a few days training. ASLEF did everything it could to intimidate drivers into coming into work during the strikes.

Workers can only oppose all the attacks by the TOCs and the government by forming independent rank and file committees to take matters out of the hands of union officials. These committees must set out to organise the unification of all the struggles breaking out across the network, and take up the demand for the nationalisation of railways under workers control, with the confiscation of all the profits looted since privatisation, and no compensation to franchise owners.



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