

Britain: Train crews resist attempt to slash Sunday pay

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London Midland (LM) was forced to cancel all but one of its 500 rail services last Sunday because rail workers refused to turn up for work. An agreement to pay staff double-time on Sundays ran out on August 31, and the company refused to renew it.

“For the majority of London Midland staff, working on Sundays is voluntary. This weekend a large number of on-board staff failed to volunteer, resulting in a shortfall in staff and the cancellation of services,” an LM spokesman said. “Normally we have no shortage of volunteers, but this time hardly anyone has stepped forward.”

Chaos ensued on the LM network, which covers 149 stations in London, Birmingham, Coventry, Liverpool, Wolverhampton, Shrewsbury, Northampton, Milton Keynes and other major towns and cities.

LM agreed to pay workers double-time on Sundays earlier this year to rescue the company when it was realised there would be a staffing crisis during the intensive summer timetable. At the same time, it was used to persuade drivers not to take solidarity action with conductors striking over compulsory Sunday working.

New employees are forced to sign the new contracts containing a Sunday working clause, but for those who started before 2001, Sunday work remains voluntary. The company expects workers to cover Sundays despite the already huge amounts of compulsory overtime being worked, bringing many to the point of exhaustion.

The attack is the latest in a series of attempts by LM to slash wages and conditions since they took over the franchise in 2007. It began with the company’s refusal to honour a pledge to put £3 million back into the pension funds for retired rail workers. This has left them significantly short of their entitlements each

week. The figure has now risen to approximately £4 million.

The introduction of a new computerised rostering system designed to exploit to the maximum union/company agreements has resulted in conductors at times being forced to work up to 60 hours a week. Last April, LM offered all staff a derisory 0.75 percent pay rise for this year and 1.5 percent next year, which is, in real terms, a pay cut.

Neither the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) nor the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) officially supported last Sunday’s action. RMT General Secretary Bob Crow made a mealy-mouthed declaration that workers were simply exercising their contractual rights not to work. “Their contracts say they haven’t got to work. It’s their choice,” he said.

However, the policy of the unions soon became clear. At Northampton, one of the stations most affected by the dispute, workers reported that regional RMT representative Steve Craddock turned up for work along with local rep Steve O’Connor. Workers were threatened that if they did not report for duty the company could interpret their refusal as unofficial industrial action.

A number of local ASLEF officials also came to work using the same argument. Despite their attempts to intimidate workers, they were unsuccessful. The company had to cancel all trains out of Northampton.

Company directors were determined not to renew the arrangement and were confident that the unions could deliver the required outcome. For their part, the unions refused to launch a campaign to renew the agreement.

Various Labour members of parliament (MPs) came out to demand compulsory Sunday working be imposed. Northampton North MP Sally Keeble said,

“A review of Sunday working is long overdue. It should be rostered into staff working hours so this situation doesn’t come up ever again.”

Watford MP Claire Ward added, “You can’t operate a service on a voluntary agreement. It is utterly ridiculous. They need to sort this matter out, and I shall be expressing those views in a letter to the secretary of state and also to the managing director of London Midland.... The franchise agreement is to provide services seven days a week.”

Attempts by the media to whip up public hostility to the rail workers were largely unsuccessful. The *Daily Mail* had to report retired car maker John Smith saying, “My wife Irene and I are on our way back home in Wednesbury after staying in Walsall and we are going to have to catch two buses to get back. I completely understand the train drivers’ point of view though. Why should they work for normal pay when they used to get double? Nobody wants to work on a Sunday.”

John from Dartford argued, “The train company needs to increase the wages to make staff want to give up their Sundays. If there is a shortage of staff in the City investment markets nobody objects to high wages, so why should people object to high rewards for ordinary skilled working men?”

Another respondent added, “Anyway, would you agree to change your working conditions to work 6 days out of 7 a week? I think not.”

Faced by action last Sunday and similar action this coming Sunday, LM has called in the unions and offered to continue double-time for Sundays until January 17. LM, the government and the trade union bureaucracy will use this time to regroup and mount a renewed offensive with the goal of enforced Sunday working at the reduced rate.



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