

Britain: Network Rail mounts strike-breaking operations against signal workers

Paul Barnes
19 January 2010

Signal workers in South Wales, members of the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT), are engaged in the first sustained opposition to a major £3 billion cost-cutting restructuring of the government-controlled Network Rail (NWR). Network Rail is over £20 billion in debt. It has to slash its annual budget from £31 billion to £28 billion by 2014, and insists it must make savings of 21 percent in efficiency.

On January 9 signal workers at the Wales and Marches Operations Area—covering sites in Newport, the Vale of Glamorgan, Rhymney Valley, Cardiff and Port Talbot panels—concluded their second six-day strike and immediately commenced an overtime ban in an increasingly bitter struggle.

Network Rail are forcing through a major change in shift patterns from three 12-hour shifts, imposed in the past, to a new eight-hour shift pattern. Despite NWR's claims about health and safety concerns for their staff, the imposition of a new roster is linked to the opening of a South Wales Central Control in Newport. NWR have chosen this event to initiate the first phase of restructuring of signalling grades in preparation for widespread job cuts.

NWR rejected any negotiated settlement, drafting in strike breakers from England and Scotland who were given a few hours training on a line with a normal bare minimum training of a month. RMT spokesmen reported that during strikes track maintenance workers are being denied access to track for routine maintenance on the South Wales mainline because strike breakers had insufficient “knowledge of the job to cope.”

Network Rail are out to break any resistance to massive cuts, which have already seen 1,000 Network Rail jobs negotiated away with a further 1,500 planned

this year. If job losses were not accepted, Network Rail threatened to impose them by sacking all its 13,000 track maintenance workers, before re-employing a reduced number on new contracts.

The multi-millionaire chief executive of NWR, Iain Coucher, made the company's position clear in a statement to a Transport Select Committee. “Our position is, to the DfT [Department for Transport] and to anybody, that we have to take heads at our organisation to meet the efficiency challenge,” he said. “We think that is right. It is how we are going to reduce the cost of running the railways. We cannot guarantee no job losses, we simply have to take them out.”

The tub-thumping speeches of the RMT, and well publicised visits to the South Wales pickets by General Secretary Bob Crow, should not be taken at face value. The RMT has already enabled 1,000 jobs to go at NWR. RMT is not a defensive organisation of the working class, but a mechanism for implementing company dictates. They are using the strikes to secure their own privileged positions and integrate themselves further into NWR company structures.

Crow is using the threat of extending the ballot to other signal boxes within the region not in order to lead an industrial offensive, but as a bargaining chip with NWR. His essential message is, “If you don't impose these changes through us [the union], you will face further disruption.” Crow stated before the strikes began that the workers' vote for a strike was in order to force “a management rethink.”

On January 4, he told a meeting of striking signallers in Cardiff, “If Network Rail bring in managers from Scotland and the North of England to try and break our members' resolve, then maybe we'll have to ballot our members in those parts of the country and challenge Network Rail nationally.... And perhaps, as well, we

should include in the ballot those infrastructure workers who face losing their jobs at the same time as signallers are being pressured to take up infrastructure work.”

All of this has since taken place without national action being called. The RMT are instead working to subordinate signal workers to the regionally divided organisational framework established over the last 10 years by the private railway companies, NWR and the Labour government.

When NWR announced its cuts package, the RMT warned of its impact on basic safety and the danger of a major rail accident. But instead of withdrawing all cooperation and launching an all-out strike until the cuts were reversed, the union responded with a pathetic letter-writing campaign addressed to Coucher pleading with him to see sense and reverse the cuts. In response NWR launched their attack on the signallers in South Wales.

The RMT are also encouraging illusions in the Office of Rail Regulator (ORR), created in 2005 out of Her Majesty’s Railway Inspectorate. Based on dozens of reports given privately to the RMT of basic breaches in safety procedures made by strike-breaking signallers, the RMT are compiling a file of breaches of basic safety that have occurred during strike action to be presented to the ORR.

The ORR is not an independent arbiter, but is implicated in the present cost-cutting drive and RMT officials know this. According to one RMT briefing, “The Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) and Network Rail (NWR) have agreed that Network Rail need to make 21 percent efficiency savings over the next five year financial control period 2009-2014. This is on top of 31 percent agreed for the previous five-year period.”

Throughout 2009 the ORR has played a despicable role in rubber stamping strike-breaking activities, especially in last March’s London Midland conductors’ strike where managers were given conductor licences after only a few days training. In the signallers strike, a Network Rail spokesperson has already said that their strike-breaking operations in South Wales had been reviewed and approved by the ORR.

Crow, time and again, has actively opposed launching an industrial offensive against the anti-union laws and the Labour government. RMT’s policy response to NWR cuts is to turn workers back towards supporting

the government (the driving force behind the cuts). It demands, “A moratorium on redundancies in the rail industry pending urgent industry wide and government discussions to put in plan a programme for our railways to provide a green stimulus to the economy to help fight the economic downturn.”

Back in 2002 when NWR was created following the collapse of Railtrack, the RMT supported its formation and encouraged illusions that this was a positive step towards renationalisation. NWR workers have since been involved in a series of strikes or threatened strikes, as the company seeks to offload its financial crisis onto their backs. But they have faced sabotage at every stage by the RMT.

Throughout 2009 the RMT has resisted calls for a national strike, has capitulated to every legal challenge made by company lawyers and called off powerful strike votes. The RMT has led every struggle by rail and underground workers to a defeat. Workers need to take the conduct of the strike out of the RMT’s hands and organise their own independent committees on the basis of a socialist program. Only on this basis can limited sectional struggles be transformed into an industrial and political offensive against NWR, the Labour government and the entire capitalist order.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact