

Scotrail workers face strike-breaking operation

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Some 550 members of the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) at train operating company (TOC) Scotrail took strike action February 20 in an attempt to prevent the imposition of driver-only operated (DOO) trains on a new service on the Airdrie/Bathgate line. Two further 24-hour strikes are set to take place March 1 and 13. Scotrail workers, who voted five to one for industrial action, are opposed to a major escalation in the destruction of jobs on the rail network.

According to the RMT, Scotrail is tearing up a 2001 agreement in which it promised not to extend DOO in Scotland and reneging on a letter from a former managing director in 2004 the RMT says was a further commitment to limit the use of DOO trains. In 2001, the union, facing widespread anger from rail workers at the attack on their jobs and safety considerations, trumpeted the agreement as halting the spread of DOO trains and protecting the jobs of guards.

Scotrail workers, like other rail workers, have shown their determination to confront the offensive against jobs, wages and conditions mounted by the TOCs and their Labour paymasters. But they have been set back time after time by union refusal to conduct any kind of industrial or political offensive that threatens the Labour government. The RMT is responsible for the defeat of every strike.

The train drivers' union ASLEF is equally culpable. Last October, the RMT reported that despite assurances from Merseyrail that it would retain the safety role of the guard, ASLEF went ahead and signed an agreement with the company paving the way for DOO trains at a later date. ASLEF committed itself "to agreeing at a future date, a formula for the consolidation of the DOO Passengers Allowance, leading to full implementation

of driver only operation."

The RMT reported that managers are being intimidated into training as guards to act as scabs during the Scotrail strike. This is not a new development. Managers were used against London Midland conductors in early 2009 and are currently being used against striking signallers in South Wales. Despite the TOCs escalating their strike-breaking operations last year, which have seriously compromised passenger safety, the RMT refuses to call a national strike. The situation at Scotrail is being watched by managers determined to implement similar schemes across the country.

The ability of Scotrail to pursue its plans to get rid of guards was prepared back in 1999 when Railtrack, the private franchise running the track, signals and other infrastructure, removed from the rule book, under pressure from the TOCs, the clause that stipulated that the guard was in charge of the safety of the train. Conductors voted more than eight to one for national action to resist the rule change, but as the strike approached, the TOCs mounted a legal challenge that was upheld by the courts. The RMT backed down and did not bother to even appeal against the decision.

By its action, the RMT allowed safety of a train to pass from the guard, who had to undergo months of rigorous training, to the driver who was now not only responsible for driving the train but has to cope with emergencies (from fires to derailments) and could nominate a "competent" person (any member of the public) to deal with them. It is now entrenched in the rule book, and no serious campaign has been launched to have it removed. Since then, the TOCs have declared open season on guards.

In the run-up to the strikes, the RMT has sown illusions amongst Scotrail workers that they are

winning significant support from the Labour government and the Scottish National Party (SNP), which heads the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, and that they can pressure Scotrail management to stick by agreements. The RMT sent a feeble letter to Scotrail Managing Director Steve Montgomery demanding that the scab-training courses be stopped and that he reply by January 28. The date came and went.

The RMT's campaign has been conducted entirely within the framework of presenting a "cost effective" case to the SNP government in Scotland, comparing the £320,000-a-year financial cost of retaining guards on the Airdrie/Bathgate line to the £429,274 paid to Scotrail's highest-paid director last year. Using this populist rhetoric, the RMT is attempting to isolate the attack on guards from the wider assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

The union officials are using the threat of further strikes to bolster their pursuit of a legal challenge to Scotrail's actions. However, as recent judgements again prove, most notably in the case of the British Airways cabin crew strike, the courts are increasingly finding for the employers despite workers voting overwhelmingly against their proposals.

Scotrail is proceeding with utter arrogance because it is well aware that the RMT's protestations are a smokescreen to confuse union members and do not seriously challenge the company's plans. Scotrail knows it can weather the routine mealy-mouthed parliamentary motions and calls for toothless inquiries into the activities of the Scotrail franchise, while it steadily implements its schemes.

The worsening economic crisis has led to a clamour from all sectors of the ruling elite for an unprecedented attack on the living standards of the working class. In the face of such an attack, the RMT says it cannot do anything because of the anti-trade union laws. Accepting the prohibition on secondary action is a smokescreen behind which the union has been able to divide up workers from company to company and between grades within companies.

The RMT does so under conditions where there is growing resistance amongst railworkers that could break out of the straitjacket it is imposing. As well as the South Wales signalmen, Network Rail maintenance staff are about to ballot for national strike action against 1,500 job losses and London Midland workers are to

ballot over pay and the emerging threat of compulsory redundancies.



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