Scotrail strike isolated by RMT, attacked by SNP government

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Five hundred fifty rail workers across Scotland again went on strike this week, in continuing opposition to efforts by rail operator Scotrail to impose driver-only operated (DOO) trains on new services. The action, which saw guards and drivers strike for three days from Monday to Wednesday, and sleeper train managers walk out for 48 hours from 6 p.m. on Tuesday, came in the wake of three one-day strikes over the past two months.

The adoption of DOO services would see guards removed from trains running on the new Airdrie/Bathgate line between Glasgow and Edinburgh. Responsibility for the overall safety of train passengers would be added to drivers' workload. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), which called the strike, has raised concerns about the implications for passenger safety if DOO trains become the norm.

Job cuts are also inevitable if such a service were rolled out across the network. Company officials claimed to have offered guarantees to the union on the conditions of employment for guards, but RMT sources revealed that the only commitment made by Scotrail was to maintain the same level of guards across the network until 2016. Scotrail has also suggested that guards could be replaced by lower paid ticket examiners.

Scotrail has nevertheless denounced the union for provoking the dispute. Although the company announced pay-outs to shareholders of £18 million last year, Scotrail is unwilling to pay the £1.4 million required to upgrade trains intended for the new line to enable guards to operate doors.

The rail company has organised a concerted strike-breaking operation, calling in over 200 managers from other operators across Britain to stand in for conductors and keep services running. During the latest strike, a spokesman told the media that 95 percent of all trains were running, with the remainder of services replaced by buses.

Scotrail has also received the unswerving support of the Scottish National Party (SNP) minority government in Edinburgh. SNP ministers held talks with Scotrail representatives in the lead-up to the strike, with the government committing itself to provide funding to the tune of £300,000 for the training and payment of scabs.

Reports obtained by the RMT also showed that the SNP had encouraged Scotrail to proceed with DOO services on the Airdrie-Bathgate line, in spite of the fact that an agreement existed with the union prohibiting this. Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson told Scotrail that it should not allow "unnecessary expenditure" to get in the way of "expansion", but Scotrail refused to announce plans to proceed with DOO services until the government pledged to compensate Scotrail for losses caused by industrial action.

Speaking of the information obtained by the union, RMT General Secretary Bob Crow complained, "These documents show a level of union-bashing from the SNP government as shocking as the dark days of Thatcher and should make Alex Salmond, Stewart Stevenson and the rest of them blush with shame".

Despite Crow's show of anger, the RMT bears responsibility for enabling the SNP to assist Scotrail in minimising its consequences. The RMT leadership has continually sought to boost illusions in the Scottish parliament at Holyrood. Crow called for "a face-to-face meeting with First Minister Alex Salmond to resolve this issue".

The culmination of the four days of action on Thursday saw an RMT lobby outside the parliament in Edinburgh, just days after the revelations had emerged about the collusion of the SNP with management.

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More broadly, the RMT has done everything in its power to isolate the strike, under conditions when workers across the railways and throughout all sectors of the economy face job cuts. Initially, the union called three one-day strikes over the course of several weeks, beginning on February 23. This strategy, which was designed to dissipate opposition amongst the workforce to the attacks of management, was coupled with attempts to divide the workforce by failing to make any appeal to signallers and other rail workers to come out in support of the Scotrail guards. The latest round of strike action saw this method employed once again, with sleeper train managers striking separately from guards.

This need not have been the case. Last month, Signalmen and rail maintenance workers across the UK returned a majority vote in favour of strike action, in opposition to the plans of Network Rail (NWR) to lay off the entire workforce of 13,000 and re-employ a reduced number on inferior contracts. They were joined by workers from the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), who supported a strike.

Faced with a high court injunction banning the strike, which would have taken place immediately after the busy Easter weekend, the RMT and TSSA fell into line and called off the industrial action. More than two weeks after the announcement, the RMT has yet to announce a new date for a re-run of a ballot of its membership for strike action, a process that can take upwards of one month.

With a general election approaching, such delays are not accidental. As Andrew Gilligan speculated in the *Telegraph* in the aftermath of the high court injunction, an RMT decision to re-ballot its members at the earliest opportunity on April 7 could have resulted in a rail strike before the election on May 6. Gilligan wrote, “Assuming another vote in favour, this suggests strike action could begin as early as 5 May, the day before Britain goes to the polls.

“Even if the actual date is later, the spectre of another rail strike could come to dominate the final days of the election campaign”.

Crow and the RMT leadership have clearly decided that in order to support the re-election of Labour such an outcome had to be avoided. With the threat of a national rail strike out of the way, the union felt able to lend limited support to an isolated dispute in Scotland that it could be confident of keeping under control.

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