

UK rail unions refuse to defend jobs

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Just weeks after the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) and Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) sabotaged resistance to the loss of 800 booking office and station staff jobs on the London Underground, private rail franchise company London Midland is pushing to axe 130 positions.

This is part of an ongoing de-staffing programme at three rail franchises. The Go-Ahead group runs London Midland, Southeastern and Southern trains. They carry 900,000 passengers daily in and out of London, Birmingham and many other areas, employing 22,000 workers. Over a billion passengers use their bus and rail franchises yearly. Back in 2009 Go-Ahead cut 300 jobs from its Southeastern franchise. Chief Executive Keith Ludeman warned at the time, “It is inevitable that we will see more positions disappear.”

In the present round of cuts, nine booking offices are to close permanently—Adderley Park, Bescot Stadium, Cheddington, Duddeston, Jewellery Quarter, Lye, Small Heath, Witton, and Wythall. At 86 out of the 90 stations operated by London Midland, management wants to “dramatically reduce” opening hours. On weekdays most station booking offices will be open only from 7 a.m. until 2 p.m. This is a prelude to further job cuts and closures. Some of the region’s busiest stations will be left unmanned for significant periods of time.

London Midland used the criteria set by the Department for Transport (DfT) for the viability of a ticket office—the sale of 12 tickets an hour. According to London Midland, ticket sales at station booking offices over the last three years declined from 52.4 percent of total sales to 44.3 percent.

Ken Usher, RMT Midland’s regional organiser, accused London Midland of deliberately running down staffing levels to produce the statistics required to force through changes in hours.

“There has been an increase in the automated tickets

people are buying, but that’s because they’ve introduced new machines and deliberately run down staffing levels in stations over the last 12 months,” he said.

As unemployment increases and passenger numbers continue to decline, private rail companies have a legal mechanism for a continuous shedding of jobs to maintain profit levels. The job cuts will be staggered from June to October to reduce the shock and condition the public to the cuts. In a number of petitions, the plans have been rejected by the local population, whose concerns about safety, accessibility, information and advice on the cheapest tickets have been brushed aside after a “consultation” period that ended on March 22.

Widespread public opposition creates the basis for uniting the travelling public and rail workers to resist these measures. Instead, opposition is being channelled by the RMT behind the objections of Passenger Focus and West Midland’s Transport Authority “Centro”. An RMT report for March 8 described Centro as having “opposed the planned cuts”. Crow declared, “RMT welcomes Passenger Focus’s objection to the jobs and ticket office carnage planned by London Midland and the organisation have clearly acted in the passenger’s interest.”

Centro and Passenger Focus’s “opposition” has centred on demands for more up-to-date figures for station booking office ticket sales and a DfT-led examination of whether or not London Midland has broken its franchise agreements on staffing levels. They have also proposed that the facilities used to replace booking office staff be improved in consultation with various user groups’ recommendations.

The RMT is opposed to any serious struggle. They are acting as government advisors, urging the DfT—run by a government that is implementing the biggest cuts in modern British history—to force London Midland to “see sense.” Just as revealing is the silence of the RMT

on the political forces that dominate Centro and Passenger Focus. Centro's officials have written to Conservative Transport Minister Theresa Villiers, urging her to "look closely" at London Midland's proposals. The letter is signed by Centro chairman, Conservative Councillor Angus Adams. The vice chairman is Liberal Democrat Councillor Jon Hunt.

Passenger Focus is a state-run body created by the DfT in 2005. On its web site it states, "Passenger Focus is structured as an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Transport, with up to 14 board members. The Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and the Greater London Authority are each able to appoint a member to the board. The remaining appointments are made by the Secretary of State for Transport."

Passenger Focus's rail passenger director is the Labour Party's Ashwin Kumar. Among other posts he worked as a press officer at the National Criminal Intelligence Service. Another board member is Nigel Walmsley, former chairman of Carlton Television and GMTV, and former chief executive of the Capital Radio Group. Another board member is David Burton, a former managing director of West Anglia Great Northern Railway. Another is Bill Samuel, former chief executive of Peterborough City Council and a deputy chair of the Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation. The organization is, in short, a mouthpiece for management.

Up to now the RMT's only threat of industrial action was one reference from Bob Crow on March 8, advising London Midland not to "bulldoze" these changes through without going through the correct "consultation process." Crow stated, "We will not tolerate the company's total disregard for agreed procedures and if we are forced to ballot for action to defend our members we will have no hesitation in making that recommendation."

In response London Midland agreed to enter a public consultation period. Since then the RMT's threat of a "ballot" for action has not resurfaced.

While building alliances with the enemies of the working class, and dropping any threat of industrial action, the RMT is abandoning even formal commitment to its phony policy of "no compulsory redundancies." The RMT and its predecessor, the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), have used this

smokescreen to impose tens of thousands of job losses in the industry over the last 30 years. On April 5 the RMT announced that rail technology specialists Thales were shedding 80 jobs, to take effect by June, and a further 140 were at risk across Britain.

In a devastating self-indictment, Crow sent a letter April 5 to union members proving that the RMT's essential function is the orderly destruction of jobs to protect the profits of the private rail companies. Crow states, "The company has set up a working group with the unions, including the RMT, to study ways in which the redundancy process is going to be handled. For a start, the company will be looking for volunteers from the affected redundancy pools of those at risk to accept a severance package. They will also be reviewing the use of agency, contractor and temporary staff. I can assure you that your union will do all possible throughout this process to defend our members' interests and make sure that any job cuts are kept to a minimum."

The RMT are allies of the government and the corporations, not rail workers. The premise of defending rail jobs and services is not to apply pressure on the government, but to prepare to bring it down, placing the rail network under popular democratic control to serve the complex needs of a modern society and not the profit drive of private rail companies.



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