

UK rail union seeks imposition of speed-ups and job losses

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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Conductors at London Midland private rail franchise are currently voting on a restructuring package agreed between the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) and the company. The RMT is urging workers to agree to a major assault on working conditions. London Midland is part of the transport giant GOVIA that runs three rail franchises in Britain—employing 22,000 workers and carrying 900,000 passengers daily. The statement below is being distributed by the Socialist Equality Party at London Midland depots.

Conductors must vote “no” to London Midland’s “harmonisation” proposals, which are supported by the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT).

The RMT and management would have you believe that their aim is to “harmonise” the wages and conditions of London Midland conductors, formerly employed by two different franchises on different terms and conditions. Don’t be fooled. If accepted, the measures will create greater divisions and inequalities than existed before. Long-established protections against excessive demands of private rail companies will be brushed aside.

The proposals are the means by which the company and the unions are implementing the productivity recommendations of Lord McNulty, hired by the last Labour government to investigate how to increase profits and slash workers’ wages and working conditions. McNulty demanded further privatisation and an assault on jobs, wages and conditions. He said the “industry needs to negotiate changes to terms of employment that currently limit flexibility and productivity.”

His preferred method is to implement driver-only on board—a recipe for massive job losses, especially amongst conductors. To push through these attacks

London Midland are offering just 200 conductors at depots Northampton, Watford and Bletchley (formerly operated by Silverlink County trains) parity pay with former Central Trains conductors. At present ex-Silverlink conductors are on £23,066 and ex-Central Trains are on £24,569. In return, ex-Central conductors will get an extra seven annual leave days, bringing them in line with ex-Silverlink workers’ 31 days.

To add additional financial pressure on conductors, the annual pay deal has been tied into the vote on “harmonisation”. A three-year pay agreement is made conditional on increased productivity, with a 5 percent rise in the first year that was below the retail price index (RPI) traditionally used to measure cost-of-living pay increases. If the deal is rejected, a first year increase of just 4.5 percent will be paid—0.6 percent below RPI.

London Midland has only agreed to these changes because most of them are self-financing. There will be:

- Significant changes to overtime rates, with all rest day working except Saturdays paid at a flat rate. Sunday, presently paid at double time, will be reduced to time and a half. Further minor changes will add up to significant cost savings for the company.

- Any conductor hired after September 1 will be forced to work rostered Sundays. This will put workers on three different contracts for Sunday working. The conductor strikes in spring 2009 fought to exclude Sundays as part of the working week for all conductors. If there is a volunteer shortage to cover Sunday work, the Operations Director and an RMT official will “ensure that the additional resources are secured”. Thus the RMT is integrating itself further into the structures of management.

- Conductors on a set shift pattern for more than six weeks due to family illness or other circumstances will

be forced to accept a 20 percent pay cut. The agreement estimates that by 2013 they will be paid over £5,000 less a year than their colleagues and with reduced overtime rates, despite working the same hours.

- Currently every shift has a statutory rostered Physical Needs Break (PNB) of 40 minutes. Under the new proposals, the right to a meal break will be removed for shifts less than six hours. It is the beginning of a concerted effort to remove existing protection for rostered breaks.

- Workers starting time on spare jobs (used to cover workers on sickness, annual leave late on duty, etc., to prevent train cancellations) will be made more flexible. The right to 32 hours rest period between shifts finishing on Saturday and starting Monday will no longer be recognised.

- A cross-cover agreement allowing workers at the two pre-London Midland companies to cover the work at each other's depots will provide management with a free hand to plan for further restructuring and the closure of depots.

- If a conductor's shift has to be extended due to engineering works, at present he is taken off duty and sits spare while another conductor is rostered. This will be eliminated by the introduction of enforced overtime.

These changes alone will produce major cost savings and increases in productivity. But the whole document is littered with such proposals disguised in corporate jargon.

The RMT are fully aware of the long-term implications of this deal. Combined with significant inroads into the safety role of the conductor, it is a further step in the elimination of jobs. RMT officials have agreed to a confidentiality clause with the company over the negotiations.

This assault comes at the same time as London Midland is intent on eliminating the jobs of 350 booking office workers. The RMT is isolating these workers from their colleagues in order to impose the job losses.

The principle of equal pay for the same job must be defended.

A "no" vote will be a blow against London Midland, McNulty and the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government.

Up and down the country the RMT is collaborating with companies imposing productivity deals,

overturning the most basic working conditions.

To prevent this sell-out, workers must form rank-and-file committees to take the fight out of the hands of the RMT bureaucrats. This would be a starting point for a campaign to unite workers in London Midland against mass redundancies and productivity drives and build solidarity action with all workers facing job losses, pay cuts and austerity measures.

Those workers who agree with such a fight will have the full support and assistance of the Socialist Equality Party. Contact us now to discuss preparations for this urgent initiative.



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