

UK unions collude in railway restructuring

Paul Barnes
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The Conservative-Liberal Democrat government has officially adopted Sir Roy McNulty's report "Realising the Potential of GB Rail".

McNulty proposes billions of pounds in cuts through slashing jobs, implementing wage cuts and vast increases in productivity for the remaining workers.

Announcing the misnamed command paper, "Reforming our Railways: Putting the Customer First," on March 8, Transport Secretary Justine Greening told MPs that McNulty had "identified inefficiencies" worth between £2.5 and £3.5 billion per year.

The paper incorporates the thrust of his recommendations, including pegging the cost of travel to cuts in costs in an effort to turn passengers against transport workers.

McNulty was hired by the last Labour government to draw up plans to make railway staff pay for the abject failure of rail privatisation. In opposition, Labour continues to support these plans, exposing attempts by rail unions to claim that the party can now pressured into opposing McNulty's report.

When the report was discussed in parliament last May, Labour MP Maria Eagle, responding on behalf of the opposition, began by placing "on record" the thanks of Labour Members to "Sir Roy McNulty" for the "work that he has carried out."

Labour would "look seriously" at his conclusions and "support any sensible proposals to take costs out of the industry" in "our own transport policy review."

Eagle urged Tory secretary of state for transport at the time, Philip Hammond, to include the unions in "the high-level group that he is establishing to take forward these reforms."

Hammond responded that he would take "a collaborative approach with the unions on labour productivity. I would be delighted to do so if an opportunity arises. I was slightly heartened by what I heard [Rail Maritime and Transport union General

Secretary] Bob Crow say on the radio this morning...[that] he was willing to look at proposals for more efficient working practices."

McNulty's main demand is for the removal of "barriers to efficiency". This boils down to 35 percent of the cuts to be made by staff reductions. He is demanding a "review [of] station staffing as a matter of priority."

Involved is the closure of 675 ticket offices, to be replaced by "extending the range of ticketing retail locations."

There is a renewed push to remove thousands of conductors from trains. McNulty describes driver-only operations as the "default" position for all train services to be implemented as soon as 2013.

On wages, McNulty wrote, "The expectation that salaries, at all levels of the railway industry, will increase ahead of inflation has to end...even the granting of inflation-level increases must be questioned."

"The overall trend to reduce continually the length of the working day and the working week is unsustainable," he wrote. The industry "needs to negotiate changes to terms of employment that currently limit flexibility and productivity."

He proposes a systematic assault on the wages and conditions of new employees.

He also proposes "longer, less prescriptive franchises" to give the train operating companies (TOCs) "greater commercial freedom" and allow them "to react to the market."

He advocates giving private TOCs the opportunity to create joint structures with publicly owned Network Rail (which runs track and signalling) in preparation for its privatisation.

This explicitly involves an erosion of health and safety measures, including "reducing the number of inspections and associated costs." McNulty announced

his determination to “discourage undue risk aversion and excessive double checking.”

He called for the formation of a command and control centre to ensure a “sustained commitment from a core group consisting of nominated CEOs, or Executive Board Members, from the major TOC-owning groups, Network Rail and a freight operator” better known as the Rail Delivery Group (RDG). Workers in the industry should be represented on the RDG “by member companies.”

The RDG, stuffed with millionaires, is tasked with implementing McNulty’s recommendations and providing, in Philip Hammond’s words, “the leadership that Sir Roy noted was lacking in the past”.

McNulty advocated looking to the trade unions for their assistance in this project, recommending that “mechanisms for establishing a dialogue at industry level with the trade unions should be explored”.

The unions have been keen to oblige. By taking up a phony campaign of small protests against what they now describe as “the single biggest attack on rail workers since privatisation” in 1996, the RMT is looking to pressure the government, McNulty and the private TOCs to include union representatives on the RDG.

They speak of their “numerous representations” to McNulty’s review, through which they legitimised his report. Since publication of the report, the RMT has organised a series of protests stunts—such as a lobby of McNulty’s office building and a small lobby of parliament when the white paper was debated in the House of Commons. Days of action were turned into appeals to the government via pressure on Labour MPs.

The RMT’s aim is to secure a place on the RDG. This was made clear by a 2011 Trades Union Congress (TUC) Northern report. The RMT, TSSA and ASLEF unions wrote to the RDG asking about union representation. Hammond told them it was “a matter for the industry”, so the unions “met with the Rail Delivery Group voicing disappointment at the lack of trade union representation.”

Last September, Crow described the purpose of their joint letter: “There is no trade union involvement or passenger involvement in the Rail Delivery Group; something that is very strange for a Group which is supposed to be inclusive and provide a platform for dialogue on the future of the industry”

The RMT’s campaign over the last weeks has been a dismal failure involving, in the main, trade union officials. Workers recognise the bankruptcy of the methods routinely employed by the RMT in the face of a declaration of war on their jobs, wages and working conditions.

Behind the smokescreen of the campaign, the unions are already implementing many of McNulty’s recommendations even before the publication of the government’s “Command” paper.

The RMT has initiated a wave of restructuring packages throughout the country that have overturned working conditions. Most blatant was a restructuring imposed on London Midland conductors that met nearly every criteria laid down by McNulty (see “UK rail union seeks imposition of speed-ups and job losses”).

Reporting one of their submissions to McNulty’s review in *RMT News* (June 2011), the union protested that McNulty’s report “falsely states ‘working practices and agreements within the industry have not undergone any significant changes for many years if not decades’”. The reality, they state, is that “nearly every grade on the railway has undertaken a restructuring in terms and conditions.”

Further, “McNulty omits to mention that unit wage costs (workers pay per output) for the railway have actually risen at a slower rate than unit wage costs in the whole economy.”

As a self-indictment, the RMT’s statement could not be clearer.

Throughout the 1980s, the rail unions paved the way for privatisation, which was introduced by the Tories in 1996 and driven through by the Labour government elected the following year. The rail unions did not organise a single strike against privatisation, but instead sought to entrench the union bureaucracy within the structures of private rail companies by collaborating with attacks on jobs, working conditions and depot closures.



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