

Thousands of UK rail jobs threatened

Michael Barnes
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The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) has published details of 20,800 jobs at risk in a joint assault by the UK's Conservative/Liberal Democrat government and the private rail companies. This comes after 10,000 job cuts initiated in spring 2009. The target is to cut costs by £260 million per year.

The cuts involve 2,000 ticket office staff at smaller stations, 6,800 non-driving staff (conductors and catering staff), 5,500 station staff and 6,800 maintenance, signalling and operational staff. These proposed cuts come from a government Rail Command Paper passed by parliament, with a token gesture of "concern" from a small number of MPs.

The RMT published the figures on May 28, the same day as they launched their "Action for Rail—People before Profits" campaign at London Euston station. In addition to leading officials from train drivers union ASLEF, clerical union TSSA and Unite, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was represented by General Secretary Brendan Barber.

The TUC is fresh from sabotaging the public sector pension struggle. The rail unions brought in the TUC to use the collective weight of the entire union bureaucracy to suffocate opposition and force through the job losses.

Action for Rail commits no one to anything. "This political campaign will not only seek to put the pressure on government and MPs to change direction but will also seek to get the support of communities and tens of thousands of passengers to apply pressure to government and the rail companies," one RMT report declared.

Prior to the photo opportunity at Euston station, the RMT said without shame, "More than 100 Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs have already signed a motion in Parliament registering their concerns, including two former leaders of the Lib Dems, Charles Kennedy and

Menzies Campbell."

The RMT has diverted widespread opposition to cuts at the booking offices of London Midland, one of the private train operating companies (TOCs), widely seen as a testing ground for the first phase of cuts, into a fruitless campaign to pressure the government through petitions. Fully 86 out of 90 booking offices will either close or have their opening hours severely reduced with the loss of 100 jobs.

What did the RMT and its general secretary Bob Crow do with the widespread opposition expressed during the period of "consultation"? A circular dated April 19 reported "that the proposals issued by the company (dated 1st March 2011) together with the 18000+ signatures to our petition, post card campaign and letters of objection (a record response to any TOC proposal—via Passenger Focus) remain on the desk of the Secretary of State for Transport, Justine Greening."

However, soon after, leaked emails from the Department of Transport (DfT) led by Tory Minister Theresa Villiers suggested that the government had already agreed to the cuts to booking offices. A DfT spokesman was congratulated for shifting the decision from the DfT to the train operating companies. According to leaked documents published by the RMT, London Midland stands to reap £1.25 million in profits.

The RMT reacted by turning to MPs to demand an investigation into the "cash for closures". Workers should treat Crow's indignation with the contempt it deserves. Year after year the RMT has created illusions in such reviews, knowing full well they have no impact on government policy. Last April the clerical rail union TSSA published leaked DfT documents that showed detailed discussion underway between government and private rail companies to impose cuts.

At the launch of Action for Rail, official union statements made clear that the unions would close off all avenues for rail workers to fight. Despite the claims

of Crow, rail workers did not get involved in this political fraud. This is the second “day of action” in which workers have stayed away, despite widespread hostility to the government’s policies.

In interviews, Crow said that if these attacks on jobs begin they will deal with them on a company by company basis—a divide-and-rule strategy that has not defended any jobs. Crow is more concerned at forcing open a position for the union bureaucracy on the Rail Delivery Group, staffed by CEOs from all the private rail companies and tasked with implementing the government’s policies.

Crow said that he would not allow any of his members to be made compulsorily redundant. Again this has been the mechanism rail unions have used to collaborate in the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs over the last 20 years. “Voluntary” redundancy is almost always a route taken by workers who fear that the unions will do nothing to protect their livelihoods.

Action for Rail is a cover behind which the RMT and other rail unions signal to the government that they will not mount any serious opposition to job cuts.



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