

UK rail workers vote down union-backed productivity package

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In a blow to the rail companies and their trade union apologists, senior conductors at London Midland depots in Watford, Birmingham, Crewe, Northampton, Bletchley, Worcester, Shrewsbury and Wolverhampton voted down a productivity package that would have overturned employee protections secured in past struggles.

In the face of concerted efforts by the union to push through the deal, 251 out of 400 conductors voted no, while 111 voted yes. Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) acting general secretary Mick Cash called for a yes vote in a letter sent to union members, while RMT depot officials and senior London Midland managers jointly campaigned for a yes vote.

The union said that if the deal were agreed to, workers would receive a 9 percent pay increase. This was made up of a standard 2.8 percent yearly adjustment, with the remaining percentage made up through extensive self-financed productivity measures. But workers voted down the proposal based on lessons drawn from a previous productivity deal in 2011, which paved the way attacks on working conditions, as well as the elimination of the conductor grade on London Overground last winter.

London Midland operates 1,300 trains per day through London, Birmingham Liverpool and Crewe and right across the Midlands, carrying 50 million passengers a year. It is owned by Govia, a joint enterprise run by Go-Ahead Group and Keolis. Go-Ahead employs 23,000 in the UK, and Keolis employs 31,000 in France and 16,000 in its global operations. Keolis is part owned by the French national railways SNCF. Govia also runs Southern (including Gatwick Express, where workers have been on strike against hundreds of job losses) and Southeastern franchises, and runs 30 percent of Britain's passenger journeys.

Prior to the productivity deal, the RMT had promised workers that all members and grades in the union would put in a joint pay claim. Without any consultation, the RMT and management then opened separate negotiations on a pay and productivity package for senior conductors.

The company moved to exploit these divisions by announcing the termination of one of those grades, Revenue Protection Inspectors (RPIs), giving 150 workers 45 days' notice of redundancy. Workers told our reporters that they had demanded a struggle against these job cuts and the termination of all negotiations with the company. Despite one statement by an RMT regional organiser threatening to ballot all RMT members at London Midland, this has not been done. Instead, the RMT entered talks to organise voluntary redundancies or arrange for displaced staff to apply for other jobs within the company.

The RMT executives' letter to senior conductors gave a free hand to London Midland management to interpret the agreement's formulations to their benefit. Such unclear formulations have been used in the recent past to enforce Sunday working on new hires after a series of bitter strikes in 2009 and to push through a previous productivity package in 2011 of which workers are still suffering the consequences.

Another worker told reporters that in the very first draft of the current productivity proposals, London Midland had demanded a no-strike clause. RMT negotiators had not alerted workers to this sinister development. The union was said to have rejected the proposal and dismissed it as a routine effort by management. However, a copy did find its way to staff, who alerted their colleagues.

This shows that further attacks are being prepared and the private rail companies are looking for ways to deal

with opposition more aggressively—with the RMT’s assistance. It should be recalled that the RMT agreed to a form of automatic arbitration for any disputes arising during the 2012 London Olympics.

The RMT’s support for this productivity package underscores the fact that the unions’ public opposition to Lord McNulty’s recommendations for a vast restructuring of Britain’s railways is fraudulent. McNulty is calling for 20,000 job cuts, the destruction of working conditions, productivity drives, and an end to expectations of automatic inflation-linked pay rises. His proposals were adopted by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government and also form the basis of the opposition Labour Party’s transport policies.

Throughout the UK rail network, workers have confronted constant restructuring and productivity drives. This is the second RMT-sponsored productivity deal senior conductors at London Midland have confronted. In late 2011, the RMT recommended a yes vote on a “harmonisation” package between work rules for two sets of workers brought together from two previous rail franchises to form London Midland.

At the time, the Socialist Equality Party urged workers to vote down the deal. We warned in a statement, “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.” This is exactly what has happened.

The statement continued: “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. He said the ‘industry needs to negotiate changes to terms of employment that currently limit flexibility and productivity’.”

The SEP said: “A ‘no’ vote will be a blow against London Midland, McNulty and the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government.... 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.”



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