

UK Network Rail workers vote for national strike

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Workers at Network Rail (NR), the UK state-owned track operator, have voted overwhelmingly to strike against a derisory four-year pay deal and the threat of further job losses.

Over 16,000 signallers, maintenance and station staff represented by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) voted by 80 percent for strike action and 92 percent for action short of a strike in a ballot turnout of over 60 percent. The smaller Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) covering clerical, supervisory and technical staff also voted 53 percent and 79 percent respectively for industrial action on a 52 percent turnout.

Network Rail put forward a four-year offer that included a £500 non-consolidated payment (not added to hourly rate) for 2015 and an increase pegged to the Retail Price Index measure of the cost of living for the following three years. It withdrew any formal commitment to no compulsory redundancies over the last two years of the deal.

The comparatively high turnout and vote in favour of the first national rail strike since 1994 indicates the pent-up anger and a determination to wage a struggle against the erosion of living standards, job cuts and speedups.

Network Rail carried out a reduction of its maintenance staff by 12 percent between 2009/10 and 2013/14, down by 2,169 to 15,813. It has been set a target by 2019 of further cost cutting of 20 percent.

The RMT announced a date for a national strike on the May 25 Bank Holiday, with an overtime ban to run on May 25 and 26. TSSA will participate in the same action.

The one-day stoppage has the potential to provide a focal point for opposition to austerity within the working class, which has seen pay decline year on year since the world financial collapse in 2008. Income

inequality for wage earners is at levels last experienced during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The RMT and TSSA will seek to prevent this. Both unions have responded to the mandate they have been delivered by redoubling their efforts to prevent a showdown.

The RMT provided 10 days notification of the planned strike action, rather than the legally required seven days, and began further talks with the government conciliation service ACAS for May 18. RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said of the vote that it was "now down to NR to start taking this issue seriously, to understand the deep-seated grievance felt by their staff and to come forward with a renewed offer which protects pay and jobs."

The TSSA has stated its desire to avert the strike.

Network Rail is committed to pressing ahead with its attacks, backed up with the full force of the government and mass media. The RMT's claim that the company can be pressured into a deal protecting pay and jobs is aimed at disarming workers and preparing a sell-out in advance. The RMT and TSSA would settle for any meagre concessions as a pretext to call off the dispute.

The very fact that a rail strike on May 25 would be the first national stoppage in 21 years is an indictment of the RMT and demonstrates their role, along with the other unions, in policing opposition. While the RMT is touted in the media and by pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party, as a militant union, it has shown repeatedly that it will demobilise opposition.

In 2001, under the leadership of Bob Crow, the RMT called off strike action against the partial privatisation of London Underground and allowed the Blair Labour government to impose its pro-market policy. More recently, the RMT dismantled one of the few strike

movements the unions could not prevent emerging against the coalition government, over the closure of ticket offices on London Underground. The powerful strikes were called off and the closure programme is now underway while a strike vote remains “live”.

The RMT has ingratiated itself with successive governments and the Rail Delivery Group (RDG). The RDG is a control and command centre of corporate CEOs from all the giant transport companies that control Britain’s rail franchises. The RDG is tasked with implementing Lord McNulty’s 2010 recommendations of 20,000 job cuts, ending automatic pay rises, and eliminating working conditions obstructing increased exploitation.

The new Conservative government responded to the prospect of a national rail strike by announcing plans to further tighten Britain’s already draconian anti-strike legislation. The details, due to be unveiled in the government’s first Queen’s Speech, will require strike ballots to have a 50 percent turnout and a majority of 40 percent of those eligible to vote in favour for strike action, for them to remain within the law.

According to the Conservatives, the introduction of these draconian measures would have led to the banning of two thirds of all strikes over the past five years.

The strike vote by NR workers exceeds the requirements planned in the new legislation.

The Cameron government’s drive to effectively outlaw strikes is a measure of how fragile social relations are behind all the triumphalism of the Tories’ re-election. Their claims to have seen off the so-called “grievance politics” of the 1970s would be punctured by any decisive struggle waged by any key section of the working class.

The government intends to pass such laws, despite the fact that its majority rests on a smaller percentage of the electorate—24 percent—than the criteria it now demands for future strike action to be free from legal sanction. Even the record low level of strike action during their last period in office, due to the suppression of all struggles by the trade unions, is deemed impermissible.

According to data released from the Office for National Statistics, the number of strikes in 2013 was less than in any year in the preceding two decades. Five years into the global recession and the biggest assault

on the working class since the “hungry ’30s”, there were 114 strikes compared with an average of 144 a year in the 2000s and 266 a year in the 1990s. Of those, 63 percent of all strikes lasted just one day while 87 percent of all strikes lasted just two to three days.

Network Rail Chief Executive Mark Carne denounced the strike vote, stating, “It cannot be right that the unions can hold the country to ransom in this way.”

Those really holding society hostage are the financial and corporate elite who exercise a stranglehold over every aspect of economic, social and political life.

To end this situation, workers must break free of the stranglehold of the trade unions—forming independent rank-and-file committees as new organisations of class struggle. It means building the Socialist Equality Party to wage a political offensive against the twin defenders of big business, the Tory government and its de facto allies in the Labour Party.



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