

UK rail unions call off strike action

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A national rail strike, due to begin on May 25, has been suspended by the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) and the Rail Maritime Transport Workers union (RMT).

The strike was in furtherance of a pay increase and job protections and would have been the first national rail strike since 1994 at publicly-owned Network Rail.

The unions have betrayed a large strike mandate and in doing so disarmed rail-workers in the face of a ferocious assault by the incoming Conservative government and the media.

TSSA, representing 3,000 white collar staff at the company, called off a strike one hour before Network Rail was due to apply for a High Court injunction based on a number of alleged discrepancies in the voting procedure.

Corporate interference in the ballot procedure is part of an ongoing campaign to illegalise strikes. In 2010 a vote for national strike action by signalling grades was also suppressed by threats of legal action against alleged discrepancies by Network Rail.

RMT, representing 16,000 signal, maintenance and station staff, subsequently followed TSSA's suit and suspended its strike, supposedly in order to consider a new pay offer by Network Rail.

The strike would have effectively brought the UK to a standstill for at least 48 hours, if not longer. This was admitted in a Network Rail document leaked to the *Guardian* newspaper.

Key airports, transport hubs and the vast majority of England, Wales and Scotland would have ground to a halt. Virgin Trains West Coast and East Coast mainline services were cancelled for two days in advance. Only one in ten trains were planned to run.

The Conservative government and business organisations were deeply concerned that tens of millions of workers could have rallied to the struggle to address their own grievances, breaking through the

decades of suppression of the class struggle by the trade union apparatus. Strikes have hit an all-time low thanks to the role played by the trade union bureaucracy. This is just the latest in a series of big strikes derailed by the unions since the economic crisis broke in 2008.

All efforts of the working class to resist the employers have been deemed illegitimate. RMT members have been demonised, using language more commonly used to denounce acts of terrorism. Network Rail accused rail workers of holding "the travelling public to ransom."

Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin sought to incite passengers against drivers, stating that "Rail passengers will not thank the unions for inflicting this unnecessary disruption." At the same time the *Daily Mail* described the strike as "cynically timed to hit families on half-term or holidays..."

The Guardian confirmed a widespread strike-breaking effort was being prepared, involving the Rail Delivery Group, the organising centre of the railway bosses, which represents Network Rail and all the private train operating companies.

National Express put an additional 18,000 seats on its buses. According to union reports, Network Rail planned to operate services using managers as stand-in signalmen. Highways England suspended all road works on motorways until next Thursday to facilitate more automobiles.

An essential part of this strike breaking operation was for Network Rail to persuade TSSA to cancel its walkout. A spokesman admitted that it was using legal action "in an attempt to limit disruption should talks with the unions fail."

Removing TSSA from the strike meant that the electrical power supply to the network would be maintained.

From the very beginning the rail union bureaucracy sought to disorganise, divide and call off the strike. In

the face of escalating media attacks and legal threats on the democratic rights of their members, they stepped up these efforts.

The RMT has long suppressed opposition to attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions, collaborating with Network Rail to impose continuous productivity drives and job cuts. On May 5, the RMT put out a press mailing appealing to Network Rail: “Union members worked round the clock throughout the bank holiday weekend to deliver a massive programme of works across the country. Although punishing targets had been set, with NR once again attempting to squeeze a quart into a pint pot, it was down to the staff currently being balloted for action for a fair pay award and job security that the works were delivered on schedule.”

TSSA General Secretary Manuel Cortes declared, “They seem more determined to impress Patrick McLoughlin and the Tories than making a serious attempt to resolve this pay row and ensure that the trains run on time over the bank holiday. We want to settle this around the negotiating table, not in the High Court.”

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said the legal assault was “highly damaging” and that Network Rail should be “focusing on the talks process.”

He made the perverse claim that the RMT would “not allow this legal manoeuvring to cloud the real issues in this dispute over jobs, safety, and pay justice.”

Cash made this statement under conditions where the Conservative Party is preparing a major attack on democratic rights which, alongside the anti-terrorism bill, essentially outlaws opposition to the governments’ policies and curtails right to strike.

The banning of strikes altogether in “essential” services has been under serious discussion inside the Conservative Party for some time. But immediately, the government intends to place a 50 percent participation threshold on future strike ballots. In public services like health, education, firefighting and transport, strikes will require the support of 40 percent of those entitled to take part in ballots—a threshold actually surpassed by the latest strike votes.

The government is also intent on removing legal restrictions on using agency workers to replace strikers.

The Socialist Equality Party warned on May 19 over the rail union’s track record, “The RMT and TSSA would settle for any meagre concessions as a pretext to

call off the dispute... 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...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.”

Just as the RMT suspend strike action at Network Rail, workers in all unions on London Underground, including those still suffering the consequences of the RMT’s betrayal of strikes against booking office closures, are to be balloted for strikes against Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson and Transport for London’s plans to impose rosters without agreement for 24-hour operation.

Docklands Light Railway (DLR) workers are set to strike on May 27 and May 29 over pay and management intimidation. DLR covers the Canary Wharf financial district in London.

Southern Trains drivers have also voted by a massive 91 percent in a turnout of 85 percent to strike over pay.

The possibility of these struggles unifying is anathema to the trade unions. The trade unions will work to limit these strikes and isolate striking workers from one another.

To break through the strait jacket of the trade unions, new, genuinely democratic organisations of class struggle—action committees guided by the perspective of international socialism—must be formed in a rebellion against the union bureaucracy. They have proven time and again that they will sacrifice the living standards, jobs and democratic rights of the working class to maintain their upper middle class lifestyles and close ties with big business.



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