

UK rail unions call off national strike for second time

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On June 1, the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMT) called off a national strike by 16,000 Network Rail employees for the second time. The union sought to justify its action by pointing to a minor pay increase, which will be more than paid for by a major cost-cutting drive being worked out with the RMT and other rail unions.

A 24-hour walkout was scheduled for June 4 and a 48-hour strike for June 9, in addition to an overtime ban for the three days. Such an action would have effectively closed transport across the UK for up to a week.

The RMT called the strikes after the unions rejected what they called a “derisory” pay offer from Network Rail.

The two-year offer the RMT used to call off the strike is no less derisory. According to an RMT circular, for 2015 it will include “a 2% increase in rates of pay consolidated into basic rates and backdated to 1st January 2015. For 2016 a consolidated increase equal to November 2015 RPI with effect from 1st January 2016. (Should RPI [Retail Price Index] be in negative figures then RPI will be deemed to be 0%).”

In return, the RMT have agreed in principle to an “efficiency” project to “deliver” savings. RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said, “Following extensive Acas [Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service] talks throughout the weekend RMT has now received a revised offer that enables us to suspend the planned industrial action while we consult in full on the details of the revised package with our Network Rail representatives.”

Network Rail Chief Executive Mark Carne said, “I am very pleased that the industrial action has been suspended,” describing “very constructive talks with the unions over the weekend” and expressing hope that

“they will be able to agree to this deal.”

Conservative Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin called it a “positive step forward” and was “pleased that the union has engaged with Network Rail in order to avoid a dispute. I hope that this deal will be now ratified by the union swiftly.”

That is exactly what the RMT and the other rail unions in the dispute—the Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA) and Unite—are now seeking to do.

The RMT suspended the first strike set for May 25, based on an alleged improved offer, which involved manipulation of even smaller percentage pay increases. This was rejected at a meeting of Network Rail union representatives, who made it clear they could not sell it to a workforce demanding a struggle against years of productivity drives and job cuts.

After this, a second set of strike dates was announced, but this was only a smokescreen for the rail unions to re-enter negotiations for 30 hours and find a formula to halt a strike that could have drawn in broader sections of the working class.

A June 1 RMT circular announcing the suspension of the new strikes exposes what the union has been negotiating behind workers’ backs: “Separately, Network Rail and the Trades Unions agree to participate on the basis of joint working in an Efficiency and Improvement Project (under the auspices of ACAS), to deliver savings. This will not hold up the pay offer for 2015/16.”

It proposes a “forum” between the unions and management to examine ways of reducing “waste” from the business to enable further “efficiencies.” This comes after years of cost cutting and job losses, which have compromised safety at Network Rail. The state-subsidized company owns and operates 20,000 miles of track and tens of thousands of bridges, tunnels and rail

stations.

The RMT circular trumpeted a new “job security package” that is vague and will be negotiated in secret over the next six months. The commitment to a no compulsory redundancy package until the end of December 2016 is worthless and the type of mechanism long used by unions and rail bosses to eliminate thousands of jobs on a “voluntary” basis. Job cuts are being planned after this date expires.

The action confirms again that the RMT rejects any struggle against the brutal policies of the Conservative government. It is also an active partner of the Rail Delivery Group, a collection of CEOs from different transport companies, of which Network Rail is a member. The labour-management body is tasked with forcing through the 2012 recommendations of Lord McNulty, which includes 20,000 job cuts, ending the automatic link between pay and cost of living increases, and vast increases in productivity.

This is the second major strike of transport workers suppressed by the RMT in the last 18 months. London Underground workers held a series of strikes against the closures of all 268 ticket offices, which was betrayed by the RMT in February 2014. While selling out the strikes, the RMT cynically announced a series of new dates for strike action, only to call them off in order to disorient and weaken workers. Throughout this time, the unions negotiated the terms of the closure programme, which London Underground Limited is now pressing ahead with without opposition.

As with the London Underground strikes, the Network Rail strike was billed by the pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as the first show of strength by the trade unions against the newly elected Conservative government. Every treacherous twist and turn by the unions has been hailed by these groups to conceal their real role in suppressing the class struggle and subordinating workers to the dictates of big business and the government.

On May 19, the SWP stated, “On Tuesday Network Rail bosses threatened legal action against the TSSA ballot. It is important that this isn’t allowed to halt the action. TSSA general secretary Manuel Cortes said on Monday, ‘We have to be prepared to do whatever it takes to try to defeat the Tories.’” The SWP continues, “He said he was proud to have supported an illegal strike in Ireland and added, ‘No law is going to stop us

from defending our members.’”

This was written as the TSSA was preparing to capitulate to a legal challenge, which they did, calling off the first strike and refusing to even set new dates. TSSA is now putting the new offer to their Network Rail union affiliates.

On May 27, after the first set of strikes was called off, the Socialist Party’s Linda Taaffe declared, “Within a week of the general election class battle lines were already being drawn; an anti-austerity demonstration outside Downing Street and in Cardiff, an electric mass march of youth in Bristol, and a threatened national Network Rail strike.” He added, “The best means to stop this government is through our collective trade union strength. ... The best way of drawing these new layers into our ranks is by the trade unions becoming a real beacon of resistance.”

Only four days later, the SP’s deliberate lies concerning the RMT came unstuck when the union called off the second set of strikes.

The pseudo-left organizations claim that rail workers unions are defensive organizations of the working class that are determined to fight but shackled by anti-union laws. The RMT and TSSA obtained majorities on strike ballots well in excess of the new criteria being imposed by the Conservative government. But this strike mandate was betrayed, confirming once again that the main obstacles facing workers are not anti-union laws but the anti-working class organizations they are trapped in.

When the RMT sold out the London Underground workers, the Socialist Equality Party wrote, “The wrecking of yet another offensive by a powerful group of workers demonstrates that no avenue of struggle remains open through the trade unions. What is required is the development of a rank and file insurgency against these decrepit organisations.”

This basic truth has been verified once again.



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