

British rail workers facing state repression

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Southern, Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) rail workers are confronting a ruthless coordinated attack by the rail company, the courts and the Conservative government.

Southern GTR conductors, members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) have held two strikes against Southern GTR, the largest private rail franchise servicing southern England from its terminuses at London Victoria and London Bridge. They also run Gatwick Express services. Govia is a joint venture operated by Go-Ahead and the French company Keolis, which is controlled by the French state railway SNCF. Keolis run services across Europe and the United States.

Workers have held strikes to protest the elimination of the safety-critical role of the conductor, who operates doors on the busiest routes in the UK. Those duties would be forced on the driver, under Driver Only Operation (DOO). Conductors would be downgraded into becoming full-time revenue collectors, with no job security.

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash has described Southern GTR as having “waged war” on its staff, adding that in his 35 years on the railways he has never seen such vicious hatred by a company against its staff. However, what he leaves out is the rail unions’ betrayal of one struggle after another that has emboldened the rail franchise holders to escalate their assault on jobs, wages, working conditions and democratic rights.

In response to the strikes, Southern GTR withdrew conductors’ free staff and family travel passes, parking permits and threatened to remove strikers from future redundancy lists. This confirms that the company’s long-term aim is to eliminate their jobs altogether. Southern GTR followed up this slap in the face by issuing a letter demanding a formal agreement to scab on any future strike in exchange for a resumption of travel passes and parking permits.

Conductors were told to renounce the strike, work normally during strikes and be available for “all extra shifts/overtime/rest day working” on any future strike days. The “undertaking” concluded that GTR will “not

disclose to any third party (including but not limited to the RMT) that I have signed this document unless ordered to do so by a Court.”

A number of drivers on Gatwick Express services (London) have already refused to drive new 12 carriage trains without a conductor to ensure safe working. The company responded by securing a High Court injunction against the action. GTR stated DOO exists already for eight- and ten-carriage trains and the train drivers’ union ASLEF were accused of inciting their members. A GTR spokesman threatened that the unions should think again regarding any protests because the injunction was a warning and could be used “on this or any other issue.”

In response, Southern GTR and Gatwick Express drivers were balloted and voted to strike by a massive 95.8 percent on an 82 percent turnout against any expansion of DOO. Despite drivers abiding by the draconian anti-strike laws passed into law in May, GTR again turned to the High Court to suppress their right to strike. On June 3, Justice Supperstone granted GTR an injunction, asserting that ASLEF had acted unlawfully in the ballot procedure.

ASLEF argued that to overturn the ballot would be “oppressive.” Supperstone dismissed these concerns, declaring, “The potential disruption and inconvenience to the general public and damage likely to be caused by the industrial action significantly outweighs the suggested harm to the union.”

All industrial action until the injunction goes to trial on June 27 has been declared illegal.

A similar attack is being prepared across the rail network. On Thursday, ScotRail conductors voted by more than 75 percent in favour of going on strike against the extension of DOO, on a ballot turnout of 75 percent. ScotRail is operated by Abellio, the private international arm of the Dutch national rail, Nederlandse Spoorwegen, and runs transport services across Europe. The RMT reports that the Dutch company has already recruited a scab workforce in advance of potential strikes.

The Southern GTR strikes follow the ruthless

elimination of the conductor role by London Overground Rail Operations Limited (jointly owned by Hong Kong metro MTR and German State railways Deutsche Bahn) in 2013-14. This was followed by the closure of all 265 of London Underground ticket offices, completed December 2015. In both instances the RMT, after overwhelming strike votes, played the main role in overseeing their implementation.

The attack on the conductor role stems from the 2012 McNulty recommendations, the Lord hired by the last Labour government, to slash 20,000 jobs, impose backbreaking productivity increases and remove the assumption of automatic annual pay increases. The Conservative government adopted the report as policy in 2014.

One of McNulty's main recommendations was DOO as the default for train operations. The RMT abandoned the struggle against McNulty's recommendations years ago, as soon as they gained assurances of a consultancy role with the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), made up of the CEOs of the different private rail companies, tasked to force through the attacks. There is not one group of rail workers that have not suffered the effects of an RMT-sponsored productivity drive. The RDG web site provides links to the trade unions' web sites.

At a Conservative Party public meeting February 22 in South London, a senior Department for Transport official, Peter Wilkinson, declared, "Over the next three years we're going to be having punch ups and we will see industrial action and I want your support... I'm furious about it and it has got to change—we have got to break them... They have all borrowed money to buy cars and got credit cards... They can't afford to spend too long on strike and I will push them into that place... They will have to decide if they want to give a good service or get the hell out of my industry."

In response, the RMT have been busy cultivating close relations with Conservative MPs in the area. A May 26 press release praised local Tories "queuing" up to "stick the boot in" and demanding GTR Southern lose its franchise. During parliamentary questions, the government dismissed the—in reality—far more polite demands of these MPs for removing the franchise from GTR and reasserted their support for the company.

The Southern GTR struggle has exposed the lying claim made by the "Left Leave" in the European Union (EU) referendum to be held on June 23, of which the RMT is the main backer alongside the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party, Counterfire and the Stalinist Communist

Party of Britain, that the British state is more amenable than the EU to pressure from the working class.

At the same time as French workers employed by SNCF and Belgian train workers are engaged in a broader struggle against attacks on their jobs and working conditions, Cash initiated another nationalist campaign—this time anti-French. This follows a series of anti-German protests led by the RMT after the Northern Rail private franchise was awarded to German state rail company Deutsche Bahn. In response to Southern GTR provocatively blaming staff sickness, instead of staff shortages, for huge ongoing train cancellations, Cash declared, "They do that because it saves them money and allows them to pump up the profits which can then be shipped across the Channel to subsidise their operations in France."

New Southern GTR conductor strikes have not been announced. Instead, a union meeting to be held in London on June 16 to discuss strategy is restricted to those "within the Conductor/Guard and Driver grades"—even though all rail and underground workers are under constant attack. The purpose of this meeting is to maintain divisions in the rail workforce and resist widespread demands for a national strike to support Southern rail workers.

Strike committees must be formed independent of the trade union bureaucracy, to organise effective national action in support of Southern GTR conductors. These committees must seek to establish contact with and join together with the struggles erupting in France, Belgium and across the European continent. This means rejecting the RMT's nationalism and adopting the internationalist and socialist programme advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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