

Workers at two UK rail companies strike against threat to jobs and safety

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Rail conductors on the busiest routes across Scotland and southern England held a 24-hour strike last Wednesday against plans to remove all safety duties from train conductors and impose driver-only operation (DOO). Britain's private rail companies plan to eliminate 5,700 train conductors' jobs across the UK and impose DOO on all train drivers.

The strikes at ScotRail and Southern GTR (Govia Thameslink Railway), called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, led to extensive cancellations and revised timetables.

Further strikes are planned over the next three weeks at ScotRail, which is run by Abellio for the Dutch national rail Nederlandse Spoorwegen. No further strikes are planned at Southern GTR (Govia Thameslink Railway). Govia is a joint venture operated by Go-Ahead and the private French company Keolis, which is controlled by the French state-run railway SNCF.

This is the second round of strikes held by Southern GTR workers. Messages of support poured in from rail workers across the country. Passenger support for the strikes was also high.

The plan to remove conductors from trains became part of Conservative government policy in 2014, after they adopted recommendations from Lord McNulty that included the slashing 20,000 jobs and the imposition of backbreaking productivity increases.

Southern GTR drivers voted to join the conductors' strikes after a ballot saw 95 percent supporting strike action on an 82 percent turnout. But GTR blocked a strike through a High Court injunction on the most spurious grounds.

A hearing for the court case was to be held on June 27. However, the drivers' union ASLEF, who described the decision to block the strike as "oppressive," decided not to challenge the High Court decision. ASLEF will not re-ballot its members and agreed to pay £250,000 in court costs to GTR. ASLEF accepted that "GTR is contractually entitled to require drivers employed on the Gatwick Express services to drive 12 car DOO."

In response to the first strike of Southern GTR conductors, the company vindictively and without precedent withheld conductors' staff and family travel passes and parking permits, worth hundreds of pounds.

To justify the slashing of thousands of safety-critical job, the media and "safety" organisations funded by the government and the rail industry are trashing the conductors' role. The Rail Safety Standards Board made the extraordinary claim that removing conductors "could potentially deliver safety benefits" because it would supposedly prevent confusion between driver and conductor!

The removal of door operations from conductors is the first step to eliminating the conductor grade. On all existing driver-only operations there are no conductors or on-board staff other than revenue inspectors.

Conductors currently operate doors, allowing drivers to concentrate on driving the train and obeying signals without distractions. Conductors are trained in passenger protection in case of derailment, train separation, chemical spills, train fires, line-side fires and train evacuation procedures. They are extensively trained in coordinating emergency services' attendance at large and small incidents. Conductors have saved countless lives. In addition, the conductors' role includes on-train safety of passengers, ticketing and customer information.

Southern GTR is the worst performing private rail franchise in the UK. To blame workers for the company not recruiting staff and the resulting large-scale daily cancellations, GTR has published workers' sickness graphs. The London *Evening Standard* denounced the latest action as a "sick note" strike. The intention is to incite right-wing elements to oppose striking workers. According to the RMT, not only had Southern GTR management unofficially blocked overtime, but they have also cancelled large number of trains when drivers and conductors were available to work.

At ScotRail, conductors are facing threats by the company to deploy a scab force to break the strikes. In a letter sent last month from the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA)

to the new Scottish National Party transport secretary, General Secretary Manuel Cortes demanded the regional government intervene to stop ScotRail from asking white-collar TSSA members “for their availability to attend [conductor] training” courses to be deployed against the strike. Despite this request, the TSSA have indicated their willingness to capitulate with Cortez adding, “It is not clear whether our members can opt out or refuse without recourse...”

ScotRail have used nationalist arguments to sow divisions between striking workers in England and Scotland, describing the strike vote as a “clear signal” that “our people in Scotland want to decide their own way forward.” The RMT facilitate this with their support for Scottish nationalism.

While RMT General Secretary Mick Cash states that every rail company is undermining the conductor’s job, the union refuses to mobilise a national strike.

The RMT is doing its best to cover up its role in collaborating in the elimination of conductors’ jobs at London Overground in 2014, because they aim to carry out the same at ScotRail and Southern GTR.

An RMT leaflet declared, “Like with London Overground many promises will be made to you with respect of protection of the guards’ [conductors’] role in the future. But words are cheap. Don’t forget that within 18 months of being told not to fear the future all the guards on the Overground had gone. We need to stand united and strong to ensure there is no repeat of that devastation across the whole country.”

This narrative conceals the unions’ role in the elimination of 130 conductors from London Overground trains. London Overground conductors were removed and DOO imposed on drivers by the rail unions, in collaboration with Transport for London (TfL) and Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson.

This followed the RMT’s support for the closure of all 265 London Underground ticket offices, completed December 2015. The closures led to the loss of more than 800 jobs.

A dinner for the London Underground’s Fit for Future stations team was held recently in London’s luxury Mayfair RAF Club, to celebrate bringing in the office closures “under budget.” The tuxedo event, with nearly 50 managers in attendance, was denounced by the RMT as “disgusting and obscene,” but only served to expose the reactionary social forces the union is working with across the transport network to eliminate jobs and privatise services.

The RMT has appealed to the Conservative government to remove GTR’s franchise. The government responded by backing GTR and blaming strikes and workers’ sickness. Confirming high-level government support for the attacks at Southern GTR, Conservative rail minister, Claire Perry, said

in an interview that Charles Horton (GTR chief executive) and Dyan Crowther (GTR chief operating officer) are “great” people who were “top-of-the-range, super experienced.” We have the “best people in the industry,” she added. This follows the comments of a senior Department for Transport official at a public meeting in South London, who called for “punch ups” with strikers.

Any new private rail franchise bid granted by the government has to include a plan to eliminate the conductors’ role and force DOO, or it is refused. Alongside the demand to remove the franchise from GTR, which has facilitated the RMT’s collaboration with regional Conservative MPs, the union is also demanding a toothless parliamentary inquiry into the Southern GTR franchise. This too can only lead to handing the initiative back to the Tories.

The rail workers struggle has shattered the false claims made by the “Left Leave” campaign in the Brexit referendum, of which the RMT was the main trade union backer. They claimed the British government and state were more responsive than the European Union to pressure. The reality is that rail workers have confronted High Court injunctions, violent public threats from government officials, gangster tactics by GTR, incitement of right-wing forces against staff, and the public rubbishing of their jobs by safety boards.

In the midst of this brutal offensive, the RMT published a circular urging a vote to leave the EU so that “we” can develop “our” industries. In other words, they called for unity with workers’ most vicious class enemies and promote national divisions and trade war. At the same time as French workers employed by SNCF rail are engaged in an ongoing struggle to protect jobs and democratic rights, Cash deepened the RMT’s anti-French campaign by protesting outside the French private sector transport group Keolis’ office in London.



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