

Union calls off UK rail strikes

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Three days into the planned five-day Southern GTR conductors strike, the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) national executive called off the action after management agreed to negotiations. The shutdown of the strike without the slightest retreat by management comes after the RMT offered a three-month no-strike arrangement to enable negotiations “without preconditions.”

Just days before, the RMT called off conductor strikes at the ScotRail company in Scotland.

The closing down of these struggles underscores once again that the RMT is doing everything to block a serious fight against the ongoing assault on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

Southern GTR said it intended to remove train door control from conductors by August 21 and impose Driver Only Operations (DOO). As part of an eight-point plan, GTR is insisting that trains run without a conductor (or On-Board Supervisor as they would be redefined). This is in preparation for the elimination of the conductors’ job altogether.

The strike was widely supported, leading to thousands of trains being cancelled. Workers fighting to protect their jobs and passenger safety faced a wave of condemnation from Conservative government ministers, and throughout the media, from the right-wing *Daily Mail* to the supposedly liberal *Guardian*.

The most vicious attack came from John McTernan, a former political adviser to ex-Labour Party Prime Minister Tony Blair. Writing in the Conservative-supporting *Daily Telegraph* he called on the government to “crush the rail unions once and for all.”

Complaining that the government was insufficiently vigorous against the strike, he thundered, “Where are the core Tory values? Where is the support for management’s right to manage? This is not even a complicated dispute. It is a simple case of right and wrong. The rail company is right and the union is wrong.”

McTernan frothed “the Southern Rail management are taking the fight to the unions. Govia Thameslink have no

intention of backing off. Why should they? They are in the right. But they are being betrayed by this pathetic Tory government...Who do they support in a struggle between the mindless militants of the RMT and the voters of commuter land?...They urgently need to back the rail companies in any ways that they can.”

In fact, the conductors strike could have been far more powerful had it been joined by Southern GTR and Gatwick Express drivers who also voted massively for strike action 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. The RMT then instructed drivers not to pursue strike action.

By calling off the ScotRail and Southern GTR strikes, the RMT has again proved its worth to the government and the rail companies.

Ahead of the Southern GTR strike, according to RMT General Secretary Mick Cash, union-company negotiations had come to within an “inch” of agreeing a similar package used by the RMT to call off the Abellio/ScotRail strikes.

This is significant as 50 percent of ScotRail services are already DOO. The four-point plan involved opening negotiations on a new door operation procedure that the RMT intended to roll out across the country. But according to reports, Southern GTR was opposed to a clause that the train could not depart without a conductor on board.

The agreement at ScotRail has still to be fleshed out, but already it exposes the RMT’s claim to oppose DOO encroachments. A train crew newsletter published by the union included a resolution from the Traincrew and Shunting Grades conference in 2015 calling for resistance to DOO “in all its forms” and a fight to restore conductors to the 30 percent of UK rail services operating DOO. A joint statement published in spring this year by the RMT and ASLEF, agreed four months earlier, reiterated opposition to the DOO.

The RMT’s desperate effort to achieve “no

preconditions” negotiations with GTR is directed against the growing militancy amongst rail and transport workers. It comes as Southern GTR drivers ballot for strikes over GTR imposing an emergency timetable and 1,000 GTR station staff ballot for strikes over the closure of 49 ticket offices and limited opening of the remainder.

Liverpool Metro workers voted to strike over the attack on the safety role of conductors. Virgin East Coast rail workers have voted to walk out in a dispute over job cuts, working conditions and safety. Eurostar rail workers are to take seven days of strike action this month in a dispute over exhausting workloads, beginning with a three-day stoppage on August 12.

Cash complained that the government was “weaponising the Southern dispute for political purposes” and called on it to “stop treating passengers and staff as collateral damage in a war that Peter Wilkinson has unilaterally declared on the rail unions.”

In March, Wilkinson (Department for Transport, DfT, Managing Director of passenger services) said the DfT were planning the introduction of DOO at Southern GTR in the summer. Earlier Wilkinson had spoken at a Conservative public meeting that heard threats against rail workers.

Cash’s complaints disarm workers politically in the face of a concerted national assault by the government and rail companies. Directed immediately at 6,500 conductor’s jobs, its broader aim is the further undermining of public transport.

The Conservative government has already adopted recommendations of Lord McNulty (hired by the last Labour Party government) from 2011 that called for DOO to be the “default” position for all passenger services in the UK. The RMT reported in the spring that the DfT’s invitation for tenders to take over the Northern [England] Rail franchise had to commit to imposing 50 percent of all passenger services as DOO by 2020.

GTR is an indictment of the privatisation of UK rail services that began in 1996-97. It is the worst performing franchise in the country. Last month, GTR secured government support for an emergency timetable that cuts an additional 350 services from its schedule.

But the RMT’s call for GTR to be stripped of its franchise and run as a government-controlled Directly Operated Railway would do nothing to halt the attack on workers’ jobs and conditions, nor protect passenger safety.

The last major experience of Directly Operated Railways was in 2009. It involved the private franchise

National Express, which ran the East Coast mainline services (from Edinburgh to London Kings Cross). Just two years into its 10-year contract, worth £1.4 billion, National Express defaulted on the agreement and was allowed to leave with a small fine.

The costs were borne by workers and the taxpayers with the service again put out to private tender. In 2015, the service was taken over by VTEC (Virgin Trains East Coast) who proceeded to smash up jobs and working conditions. VTEC workers have just voted by a massive majority to strike in opposition.

Labour Party London Mayor Sadiq Khan has also called on the new Conservative Transport Secretary Chris Grayling to “take control” of Southern, offering to put “my senior TfL [Transport for London] team in charge of the Southern franchise until we get a permanent resolution.” This comes in the immediate aftermath of TfL’s closure of all 265 London Underground ticket offices, in which the RMT collaborated.

Khan is following the same strategy as former Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson. Under his direction, former Silverlink Metro services in London were brought under London Overground control. London Overground is a TfL franchise run by Hong Kong Metro (MTR) and Deutsche Bahn. Its first act was to remove 130 conductors from all their trains, again with the support of the RMT.

Workers must reject the different pro-capitalist proposals by Labour and the trade unions, which involve the constant assault on jobs, working conditions and the democratic right to strike. They must fight to elect rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle and negotiations out of the hands of the RMT officials.

Only the nationalisation of the railways under workers control, as part of the fight for a workers’ government, committed to socialist policies, can reverse these attacks. This is what the Socialist Equality Party is fighting for.



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