

UK: Southern GTR railworkers strike

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A three-day strike began Tuesday by conductors employed by Southern GTR (Govia Thameslink Railway). Days earlier, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) instructed the workers to sign new contracts they have been opposing since April.

On Monday, Southern GTR made a legal challenge against any future strikes. In response, RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said, “We have a duty to issue our members with clear legal advice that protects their position in the teeth of the threat of mass sackings. That is what we have done.”

Southern and the RMT are to hold further talks today in an attempt to end the dispute.

Rail workers’ determined resistance has been sabotaged at every stage by the RMT and the train drivers union, ASLEF, in collaboration with the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party. All have colluded in suppressing growing calls for a national strike in defence of all rail workers’ jobs.

The RMT’s decision followed Southern issuing three months’ notices of contract termination, after conductors refused to accept a £2,000 bribe in return for their forcible transformation from conductors—trained in over 35 safety critical tasks, including vital door operations being forced on the driver—into “on board supervisors” focused entirely on revenue collection.

Southern GTR management were emboldened in their attack by the support of the Conservative government, whose aim is to impose a public defeat on rail workers to intimidate future opposition to mass job losses. In 2012, the government adopted Lord McNulty’s recommendations for a vast restructuring of Britain’s railways. McNulty, hired by the previous Labour government, recommended the slashing of at least 20,000 jobs, the imposition of Driver Only Operation (DOO) nationally and the removal of more than 6,000 conductors.

The RMT previously did a deal with ScotRail in response to a series of determined strikes by conductors resisting the removal of door operation and the imposition of DOO. Opposed to unifying the struggle of Southern GTR and ScotRail conductors, the RMT called off the ScotRail strikes and entered negotiations. The RMT claimed the outcome was “a major breakthrough in the battle against driver only operation.” In reality, the driver will now open doors and conductors close them, leaving the company partially victorious in their latest effort to remove the conductors’ safety role.

The RMT attempted to get Southern to agree the same formula to call off strikes, re-entering negotiations on October 6. The revised offer went further than the ScotRail deal, with the RMT agreeing to Southern GTR’s “objectives” of making conductors “On Board Supervisors,” but with a limited safety role. The RMT offered to call off the strikes with binding arbitration.

Southern GTR rejected the RMT’s entreaties, insisting that conductors had to be removed from all control over the train.

In August, the RMT sabotaged a five-day strike on the second day after Southern GTR agreed to enter negotiations, without making any concessions. This followed the RMT and ASLEF’s capitulation to high court injunctions on behalf of Southern GTR that resulted in overturning massive strike votes against the expansion of DOO.

In September, the RMT called off a strike by Southern GTR station staff who were fighting ticket office closures, reduced opening times of ticket offices and staff restructuring. As a result, the RMT and Southern are trialling new working arrangements at eight locations.

This is the latest in a series of betrayals by the RMT, which is described by pseudo-left groups as the premier

“left” union. The RMT and ASLEF oversaw the removal of 130 conductors from London Overground trains in 2013/14, and the closure of all 265 London Underground ticket offices in 2015, in alliance with then Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson.

As Southern conductors were in struggle, the RMT ensured that a series of large votes for strikes by rail workers across the UK were isolated and then called off.

Southern conductors have confronted the courts, media and intimidation and threats from Conservative ministers and the company. Due to general public sympathy for the conductors and the abysmal record of Southern GTR, which has proved incapable of running a railway operation even when gifted vast public subsidies, the company have funded a media blitz urging passengers to blame RMT members for the collapse of its rail services.

This backfired and posters were pulped by the company when they were told they could be responsible for any assaults on staff. The RMT described a Twitter campaign as incitement, contravening Twitter rules. Huge numbers of passengers used the Twitter campaign to attack the company and defend rail workers.

“Left” Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has done nothing other than issue short statements fully backing the RMT leadership’s various campaigns.

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP) have described, for the hundredth time, the RMT’s latest token industrial action as a victory and the start of a “fightback” by the unions. The SP has senior positions on the RMT’s executive and described the ScotRail deal as a “big victory” which will be seen by union members “facing similar disputes with franchise holders across Britain, such as on Southern Rail and now Virgin East Coast, as a major boost.”

The SP conclude by lying about the RMT’s next steps in their campaign to “fight for a guard on those services that currently run as driver only operation in Scotland.” The RMT/ScotRail agreement in fact specifically states that all existing working arrangements will not be changed and ScotRail already operates over 50 percent of trains as driver only.

The SWP’s article, “With ScotRail licked workers take on Southern bosses over role of train guard,”

makes a positive virtue out of divisions fostered by the unions. On the ScotRail deal, it asserts on the one hand that “guards will retain their full status and skills” before having to admit that “Drivers will open doors...”

The ScotRail deal is an erosion of one of the 35 vital safety roles assigned to the conductor. One is to ensure the train arrives safely in the station and is fully in the platform before opening the doors. This role has prevented many passenger deaths and injuries, and frees up the driver to concentrate on observing signals.

The SWP’s initial reaction to Southern’s announcement threatening mass sackings was to corral any opposition to the RMT back behind the trade unions. “Rail unions must fight the threat—and everyone should back them,” the SWP declared.

Throughout the Socialist Equality Party has urged all rail workers to initiate a national strike in defence of Southern GTR conductors. We explained that such a struggle requires a rebellion against the rail union bureaucracy, based on a new socialist strategy, through the formation of independent committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the RMT.



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