National strike needed in Britain to defend striking Southern GTR conductors

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Four hundred conductors employed by Southern GTR (Govia Thameslink Railway) begin their second three-day strike today in opposition to plans to force them to accept roles as On Board Supervisors (OBS).

The conductors have been protesting the plans since April and have held a number of strikes. Southern GTR has issued three-month termination of contract notices to all conductors who refuse to sign the new contracts by December 31.

The Rail, Maritime Transport union (RMT) have advised its members to accept the new contracts without even putting it to a vote. The legal advice came ahead of a three-day strike that began October 11 and is the most blatant effort yet by the RMT to end strikes at Southern GTR and enforce the changes demanded by management.

The OBS role will remove conductors' control over safe passenger door operations and impose "Driver Only Operation" (DOO) throughout the network, before eliminating conductors' jobs altogether. Conductors at present have a responsibility for over 35 safety procedures including door operation, to derailments, chemical spills, on board fires, evacuation procedures and many more.

The RMT's announcement followed Southern GTR's refusal, backed by the Conservative government, to budge an inch in a series of negotiations requested by the union. The RMT's aim was to find a deal to call off strikes by forcing the dispute into binding arbitration through the state conciliation service ACAS—the graveyard of many previous workers' struggles. Southern GTR has rejected each entreaty, as they seek to decisively defeat rail workers in order to intimidate conductors nationally.

Conductors should reject the RMT's proposal. The aim of the private franchise owners and the government is to remove the remaining 5,700 conductors from Britain's trains. Southern have used the courts to block two massive strike votes by Southern GTR drivers. If Southern is successful, all private rail franchises will escalate their own attacks.

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash couched his proposal to sign the new contracts as if it were the only responsible thing to do to protect jobs. Once the OBS contracts are signed, however, and trains can move without a conductor on board, the workers will be powerless to resist future attacks. The RMT has helped establish the conditions where 50 percent of Southern trains are already driver only operated and 30 percent are throughout the country.

Southern workers are demanding an escalation of the strike, and among other railworkers there is widespread support for a national strike against DOO. But the RMT's proposal to accept binding arbitration and its sending of begging letters to CEO Charles Horton show that the serious fight required to protect jobs and safety cannot be pursued under its leadership.

The fate of London Overground conductors, where the RMT, in 2013-2014, helped London Overground Rail Operations Limited eliminate 130 conductors, entirely transforming the whole network into driver only operation, stands as a salutary warning. The RMT is now trumpeting a deal it agreed with ScotRail earlier this month as a way forward. The deal removes door-opening procedures (not closing) from the conductor and imposes it on the drivers.

Conductors' jobs and safety role are under assault throughout the country, yet the RMT have forced conductors in the same company as those striking to work during the stoppages. At Govia's London Midland franchise, which operates trains from London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Crewe and Coventry, the rail

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unions even agreed a productivity deal this summer, incentivising conductors and drivers to work overtime.

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party have lauded Cash for turning to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for support. The reality is that, as with all such appeals, the TUC has done nothing to mobilise workers.

Equally, RMT protests outside company offices and outside Parliament have achieved nothing. The support of senior Labour Party politicians, such as leader Jeremy Corbyn and London Mayor Sadiq Khan, resulted in an offer to bring in Transport for London experts, fresh from closing all London Underground ticket offices, to run Southern's lines into London.

Both Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, who was the RMT's parliamentary group coordinator, have barely raised the plight of Southern conductors. Instead, they have used the virtual collapse of the Southern GTR franchise to call for the Conservative government—the very force behind the assault on the conductors' jobs—to take it over.

The RMT also turned to Conservative MPs from the areas affected by Southern GTR, who would later turn around and attack the strikes.

Above all, the RMT have sought to prevent the rail strikes becoming a focus for a political conflict with the hated Conservative government. As Southern conductors engaged in a bitter three-day strike October 11, the RMT called off a series of other strikes or prevented unified strikes on the railways over job losses.

In its role as an arm of management, there is nothing particularly unusual about the RMT's actions. Unions carry out the same betrayals in every sector of the economy. Their role is to police the working class and suppress the class struggle.

The most important strike carried out by workers in Britain over the last year was that of junior doctors. Earlier this year, 50,000 junior doctors overwhelmingly rejected an inferior contract, demanded by the government, that is detrimental to their pay, terms and conditions and jeopardises the safely of the public who rely on the National Health Service. After a series of strikes, the doctors union, the British Medical Association (BMA), endorsed the contract and then attempted to foist it on their members. The doctors continued to reject the contract. In response, last month the BMA called off all planned strikes. As a result, the government is imposing the contract, as planned, from this month.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on Southern conductors to reject the RMT's recommendation to sign the new contracts. Delegations of Southern GTR strikers must appeal for solidarity from workers throughout the Southern GTR franchise and from workers at rail companies nationally.

Support must be won from workers and youth everywhere, including those under assault in the National Health Service and education sectors. Southern GTR workers must take the strike out of the hands of the RMT and establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy. But they must also recognise that the fight for the most basic rights such as a secure job and safe working conditions confronts workers with a fight against the entire capitalist class, their courts, media and political parties. And this requires the building of a new political leadership for the working class.

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