

Rail strike halts services throughout southern England

Richard Tyler**14 December 2016**

Railway drivers and conductors began a three-day strike on Tuesday, halting all Southern Rail services.

Operating along the south coast of England, Southern Rail trains serve towns including Brighton, Eastbourne and Portsmouth, as well as providing vital commuter links into London and Gatwick Airport.

A last-minute attempt by Southern's owners, Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), to have the strike banned, failed when the Appeal Court upheld last week's High Court ruling that industrial action did not infringe rights under European law.

The strike means some 2,240 trains were cancelled over the course of the first day's stoppage, affecting up to 300,000 passengers, with only limited services on the Gatwick Express to the UK's second busiest airport.

Involving members of train drivers' union ASLEF and the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) covering conductors, the strike will last 48 hours, with a further 24-hour walkout scheduled for Friday. The unions have also planned industrial action on Southern Rail from January 9 to 14.

Rail workers are taking action against demands that drivers carry out safety-critical tasks usually done by conductors, as part of the company's moves to implement "Driver Only Operation" (DOO) on Southern Rail and boost profits. GTR already runs entirely Driver Only Operations on its Thameslink and Great Northern routes.

The drivers and conductors have been vilified in the press, with Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper featuring articles in which they are derided as "pig-headed militants," "union scumbags" and told to "hang your heads in shame."

The pro-Conservative *Telegraph* opined, "A handful of militants in the transport sector is wreaking disproportionate havoc in the most productive corner of the UK economy. This cannot stand."

Several editorials called for their right to strike to be removed, and even the repeal of the 1906 Trade Disputes Act, which would open unions and strikers to massive claims for damages for any industrial action they take.

The strike by the drivers and conductors at Southern Rail reveals the enormous strength of the working class, but also the critical role played by the trade union bureaucracy in isolating and defeating every movement in opposition to the rapacious demands of the ruling elite.

Railway workers not only confront the train companies, the government and the vast majority of the media arrayed against them. Crucially, their ability to prosecute a successful fight to defend their pay, conditions and the safety of the travelling public is undermined by the role of the unions and their Labour Party allies.

Labour mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, called on the strikers to halt their action, and used a video to call for commuter rail services in the south to be brought under Transport for London (TfL), over which he has control. Khan boasted that on his watch, strikes had been virtually eliminated at TfL. What he did not say was that TfL, with the collaboration of the RMT, has closed all 265 Underground ticket offices and imposed DOO on London Overground, with the loss of 130 conductor jobs.

Labour's "left" leader Jeremy Corbyn, who has close connections to the ASLEF leadership—which assisted in funding his leadership campaign—refused to utter a single word Tuesday about the Southern strike, allowing the government's denunciations of them to go without challenge.

Privatisation in the late 1990s, which the unions never took action to oppose, saw the break-up of the formerly state-owned British Rail into a myriad of competing "train operating companies" (TOCs) and "rolling stock operating companies" (ROSCOs). While the tracks, larger stations and associated infrastructure were originally hived off into a separate private company (Railtrack), track maintenance was parcellled off to 13 individual companies across the network.

Rail workers' conditions have been constantly under attack ever since. The private operating companies have sought to boost their profits and "shareholder value" at the expense of the workforce, and through hiking fares. Rail fares in Britain are notoriously the most expensive in

Europe, often by a factor of 200 to 300 percent for similar journeys on the continent.

As part of the privatisation process, the TOCs were granted lucrative franchises running for ten years or more, and were handed hundreds of millions of pounds in subsidies and grants. According to figures produced by the Trade Union Congress in 2015, the TOCs received some £3.8 billion from the public purse, and handed over at least £183 million in dividends to their shareholders.

The current dispute is a textbook case of how the trade unions and Labour act to prevent a united struggle by rail workers throughout the country.

Driver Only Operation already applies to at least a third of all UK trains. Far from opposing this, the RMT called off a strike in August by conductors working for ScotRail and then negotiated a deal handing over the responsibility for opening the doors to drivers. While ScotRail conductors retain responsibility for closing the doors (for now), this is just the thin end of the wedge for imposing full Driver Only Operation. The diminishing of the conductors' role will inevitably be followed by attacks on their jobs, pay and other conditions.

While calling off the strike in Scotland, the RMT also halted a planned five-day strike at Southern Rail on the same issue, after management agreed to "negotiations."

The RMT have disarmed workers in the face of a massive government-backed attack on their members' jobs, terms and conditions.

Following a media appearance by the government's Transport Secretary, RMT leader Mick Cash released a statement saying, "This morning Chris Grayling claimed again that the action [by RMT members] on Southern is political—it isn't, it's about safe train operation for both passengers and staff alike." Cash boasted that the RMT had been able to "resolve disputes and reach agreements on Scotrail and elsewhere" and that this would not have been possible "if our motivation is purely political."

While Cash insists the strike at Southern Rail is "not political," the Tory government is acutely conscious of the political nature of the attack on rail workers' conditions. When asked what he would do to stop future strikes, Transport Secretary Chris Grayling said, "We are thinking very carefully about how we take things forward. I'm not going to rule anything in or anything out today." Several newspapers, including the *Financial Times*, reported the statement as proof that the government is preparing further anti-strike and anti-union legislation.

Earlier in the year, Peter Wilkinson, a senior official at the Department for Transport who is managing director of passenger services, told a public meeting there would be "punch ups" with drivers when the government changes

their working hours to "improve" rail services.

After claiming train drivers earn £60,000 a year or more and only worked three days a week (both claims are untrue), Wilkinson said, "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."

The strike at Southern is not simply over the issue of DOO. In October, the company threatened conductors that if they did not sign new contracts imposing DOO by December 31 they would be sacked. The RMT refused to oppose this and advised their members to sign. While many workers have reportedly signed the contract, they have continued to strike in opposition to the attacks.

The strikes at Southern Rail are indicative of growing opposition in the working class to years of relentless attacks by successive governments. Earlier this year 50,000 junior doctors struck to oppose attacks on their conditions and on the National Health Service. On the same day that drivers and conductors at Southern Rail began their latest strike, the Communication Workers Union announced that thousands of its members at the Post Office would launch a five-day strike next week as part of a long-running dispute over job losses, pensions and branch closures. Delivery drivers for shopping chain Argos also plan a three-day strike next week over holiday pay.

The belligerence of the government in the face of the Southern strike is a statement that it will not tolerate any resistance whatsoever to deskilling and the imposition of yet deeper attacks on workers' living standards.

Late Tuesday, it was announced that unions and Southern management would meet at the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service today, in a further bid to end the dispute.



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