

UK Southern Rail strike continues as British Airways cabin crew vote to strike

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Train drivers and conductors are continuing their three-day strike today, halting all Southern Rail services across England's south coast and on busy commuter lines into London. A reduced service had to be run on the Gatwick Express, serving the UK's second busiest airport.

The first two days of the strike were on Tuesday and Wednesday. Despite there being no industrial action on Thursday, travel was severely disrupted because of an ongoing overtime ban and many trains and crew being in the wrong location when services resumed.

Members of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF)—representing most drivers—and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT)—representing mainly conductors—are seeking to stop the roll-out of Driver Only Operations (DOO) on Southern Rail. Currently, conductors are responsible for some 35 separate safety functions, including the opening and closing of the train doors.

Southern Rail, which is owned by Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), wants to hand over door operation to drivers, diminishing the safety-critical role of conductors, who would become little more than revenue collectors and be open to further attacks on their jobs, pay and conditions.

On Wednesday, the RMT was excluded from conciliation talks held at the governments' Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). Union leader Mick Cash said the "RMT is furious at the complete contempt that has been shown to us by Southern Rail this morning, which leaves us in a state of limbo when we should all be around the table thrashing out the issues that have led to the current action."

However, a second day of talks between ASLEF and GTR at ACAS on Thursday ended without agreement. Nick Brown, GTR chief operating officer, pinned the blame on ASLEF, saying it would not accept his proposals, and threatened that the company would press

ahead with its plans to "modernize our railway."

ASLEF later issued a statement that the "door remains open for future talks."

As the strike began, Conservative Transport Secretary Chris Grayling called the action a "deliberate act of militancy" and accused the unions of "trying to bring [the railway] to its knees." He dismissed union claims the strike was about commuter safety as "palpable nonsense."

Hysterical editorials in right-wing newspapers demanded changes in legislation to remove the right to strike from railway workers.

This was picked up by Tory MP Chris Philp, who held talks this week with Grayling on possible new anti-strike legislation. "The RMT and ASLEF have massively overstepped the mark and unfortunately that means the government has to legislate," said Philp.

His call for harsher anti-union laws was joined by former justice minister Dominic Raab, who said, "Targeting strike action to inflict misery at this time of year is deeply irresponsible and cynical on the part of union bosses. The government is right to keep its options open and resist this licensed blackmail."

Legislation enacted in May had already increased the level of support union members need to demonstrate in a ballot before a strike can be deemed "legal." The Trade Union Act was passed as the result of a dirty deal with the Tories so that nothing would stand in the way of the Trades Union Congress endorsing the Conservative-led "Remain" campaign opposing a Brexit (British exit from the European Union).

Members of both the RMT and ASLEF voted overwhelmingly in favour of a strike at Southern Rail, with 70 percent of conductors and 87 percent of drivers supporting action. Turnout far exceeded the 50 percent hurdle imposed by the Trade Union Act. Almost 90 percent of ASLEF members balloted voted for industrial action, with 321 out of 393 conductors balloted on

Southern Rail belonging to the RMT also supporting a strike.

Train drivers and conductors taking action at Southern Rail confront a UK government-backed network of internationally operating transport corporations whose only rationale is to maximize profit, at whatever cost to the jobs and conditions of workers.

The franchise under which GTR operates its Southern Rail subsidiary is a license to print money. Unlike all the other rail franchises, GTR receives billions of pounds from the exchequer, essentially as a management fee to operate services, while all ticket revenues are paid back to the government. In this way, the company bears no risk if services are cancelled or delayed, leading to lower revenues, as this shortfall simply diminishes the amount paid back to the public purse. It is no wonder, then, that only 20 percent of Southern trains arrived on time in the year from April 2015 to March 2016.

GTR is itself a joint venture between the Go-Ahead Group, who own a 65 percent stake, and Keolis (35 percent).

Go-Ahead is a provider of passenger transport in the UK, as well as having similar undertakings in Germany and Singapore. A FTSE 250 Index group listed on the London Stock Exchange, it has 26,160 employees and recorded revenues of £3.2 billion in June 2015.

While Go-Ahead's share price dipped by almost 2.25 percent when markets opened on Thursday morning, it fully recovered in later trading, "as investors shifted their focus to the rosier outlook elsewhere in its business" the *Telegraph* reported.

Transport analyst Joe Spooner called the implications of the one-off cost of the Southern Rail strike "negligible" for its parent company, which earlier this year reported a 26.8 percent jump in pre-tax profits to £99.8 million for the year to July 2.

Keolis is the largest private-sector French transport group, running passenger railways, tramways, bus networks, funiculars, trolley buses, and airport services in a dozen countries. It employs some 54,400 people and increased its revenues in 2015 by 12 percent, to €5 billion (£3.7 billion). Keolis itself is majority owned by SNCF, France's state-owned rail company.

Despite the members of ASLEF and the RMT working on the same trains, everything has been done by the union bureaucracy to prevent a united offensive. Further strikes at Southern Rail next week on Monday and Tuesday will only involve RMT members, with ASLEF members working normally. After today, the next time any joint

action is scheduled to take place is from January 9-14. This is to take place after the December 31 deadline set by Southern Rail for its employees to sign contracts accepting DOO or face the sack.

On Wednesday cabin crew employed by British Airways (BA) voted by 4-1 to strike, in a ballot with a 60 percent turnout. The strike vote followed their rejection of a derisory 2 percent pay increase from BA, which, given the rate of inflation, amounts to a virtual pay freeze.

A stoppage could start as soon as next week and will potentially hit both short- and long-haul flights from Heathrow, the UK's biggest and busiest airport. According to the Unite union, earnings for those cabin crew working in BA's "Mixed Fleet" are advertised as being between £21,000 and £25,000 a year, but in reality start at just over £12,000, plus £3 an hour flying pay.

Unite represents some 2,500 out of a total of 4,500 cabin crew in the Mixed Fleet—just over a quarter of the company's 16,000 cabin crew.

The Mixed Fleet group, set up in 2010, is a deliberate move by BA to cut costs and divide the workforce. All those recruited by BA are now placed in this operation and start on far lower pay and worse conditions than crew members who joined before 2010.

Competition in air travel is fierce, especially since the rise of budget airlines like Ryan Air and EasyJet. Traditional carriers such as BA, Germany's Lufthansa and Air France have boosted profits by developing low-cost operations themselves and attacking the jobs, pay and conditions of both cabin crew and pilots. This has led to a number of strikes over recent months, including pilots at Lufthansa and flight attendants at Air France.



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