

Strikes in transport and other sectors to hit the UK

Robert Stevens
9 January 2017

A series of strikes is set to begin in Britain this week, pointing to a nascent rebellion by workers against the efforts of the trade unions to suppress opposition to the corporate-government onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions.

On Sunday evening, members of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) walked off the job for 24 hours to protest unsafe conditions resulting from ticket office closures and job losses. The strike will bring much of the London Underground network to a halt, with the closure of many central London stations.

On Tuesday, train drivers employed by Southern Rail, which is run by the Govia Thameslink Railway franchise, will walk out for 48 hours, with an additional 24-hour strike to be held Friday. The drivers are protesting the company's decision to impose Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains, first by eliminating the role of conductors in opening and closing doors and reducing their mandate to collecting fares. The move, endangering public safety, is aimed at the eventual elimination of conductors on the railways.

Southern, backed to the hilt by the Conservative government, claimed they were justified in imposing DOO, citing a report by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), a non-ministerial government department. Ian Prosser, the chief inspector of railways, stated, "ORR is satisfied that *with suitable equipment, proper procedures and competent staff in place, it is a safe method of working.*" [Emphasis added]. However, the rail industry-funded body, stuffed with Tory appointees, was forced to acknowledge that such procedures, equipment and staff do not presently exist, highlighting over 20 serious safety failures related to DOO and concluding that until changes are made DOO

remains unsafe.

Drivers have warned that removing conductors would be a threat to passengers both when on board and when alighting, with only grainy CCTV camera pictures available to check whether or not it is safe to close a door.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, British Airways (BA) cabin crew are set to strike in protest against a two-tier wage system and poverty pay. Pay rates for the 4,000 cabin crew involved start at just £12,000, plus £3 an hour flying pay. Two thousand are in the Unite union.

Unite cited a recent survey revealing that almost half of new cabin crew had taken on a second job to make ends meet, with some sleeping in their cars between shifts. Two-thirds admitted to going to work unfit to fly because they could not afford to be off sick.

The train strikes are set to spread. This week, the RMT is to ballot its members employed by Arriva Rail North in a pay dispute. However, the pro-Conservative Party *Daily Telegraph* noted that "the dispute is underpinned by the possibility of the company introducing driver only trains--the issue which has been at the centre of the industrial action on Southern."

The action would affect cities such as Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne and Hull, and could spread to the West Midlands, Merseyside and other lines into London.

Teachers in Northern Ireland are also set to strike this month. Members of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Women Teachers (NASUWT) are to hold a one-day strike over pay, workloads and job security in an ongoing dispute. The teachers will strike in the Derry City, Strabane, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and Omagh council areas on January 31.

Last Friday, members of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) began industrial action short of a

strike in a pay dispute, refusing to take part in inspections carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate until further notice. They are to hold a half-day strike on January 18.

These strikes are taking place in the face of the sabotage of a previous round of industrial action that was slated to take place among postal workers, Southern Rail staff and airport staff during the Christmas and New Year holiday period. The Communication Workers Union ensured that a strike by postal workers at Crown Post Offices was confined to just 4,000 of its members at 50 offices.

On December 20, Unite announced that a strike over pay by 1,500 of its members employed by the baggage handling firm Swissport was off, with the union recommending the workers accept a new pay offer.

Prior to Christmas, the BA crews were also set to strike, but soon after its Swissport intervention, Unite, Britain's largest union, connived with the company to call off the strike. General Secretary Len McCluskey personally intervened in the negotiations and the union recommended a pay offer that was subsequently rejected by the membership by a margin of 7 to 1.

The RMT were unable to prevent a strike by conductors at Southern, held December 18 and 20, but the union offered the company a Christmas truce.

Under conditions of escalating crisis for the British ruling elite, the government is insisting that workers sacrifice their historically won social gains so that British corporations can compete in a post-Brexit environment.

In March, the government's Trade Union Act will take effect, imposing as requirements in strike ballots in "important public services," including transport, a 50 percent turnout and a vote to strike by fully 40 percent of the entire workforce.

Even more draconian measures are being demanded. Prior to the Christmas strikes, Tory MP Chris Philp stated that any proposed public-sector strikes should be legally required to go before a High Court judge "who would determine whether the strike was unreasonable and disproportionate for it to continue."

Philp is part of a group of 20 Tory MPs who have discussed his proposals with Prime Minister Theresa May. He also proposes that "we follow what Canada, Italy and Spain do by making sure that even if there are public-sector strikes, 50 percent of the services should

still be running."

When forced to call limited actions to make a show of opposition, the unions are desperate to prove that the suppression of struggles can be carried out under the existing legal arrangements, utilising their services.

The unions' role is underscored by the fact that in both the Southern dispute over DOO and the BA cabin crew struggle, workers are opposing attacks made possible only by previous betrayals by the unions.

The rail unions have collaborated for years in the imposition of DOO nationwide. Just in the capital, the rail unions collaborated in the elimination of 130 conductors from London Overground trains by Transport for London and then Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson. The RMT also agreed to the closure of all 265 London Underground ticket offices, completed in December 2015, with the loss of more than 800 jobs.

In 2010, Unite sold out a struggle by BA cabin crew, enabling the airline to impose its new two-tier wage structure.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact