

UK rail union TSSA and pro-Corbyn Momentum stoke up anti-European sentiment

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The pro-Jeremy Corbyn group, Momentum, has posted on its Facebook page a video produced by the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) rail union. It has promoted it on Twitter, writing, "As your rail fares rise again, here's a special message from our friends on the continent..."

The TSSA is one of Momentum's major benefactors, providing the group's headquarters in central London.

On all counts, the video is a filthy right-wing populist piece, which pits British workers against their class brothers and sisters in Europe. Momentum's endorsement of the video speaks volumes for the group's reactionary nationalist politics.

The video shows workers and youth from the Netherlands, France and Germany as gleeful, willing accomplices in the takeover of much of the UK's rail network by European state-run companies. They thank the "British people" for privatising the railways and providing massive subsidies and big profits to "their" companies. They then declare that the UK's exit from the European Union (EU) is no solution because the Conservative government wants further privatisation, "which means *we* can take over even more" [emphasis added].

The video clip ends with two German soccer fans celebrating a 3-0 win over England and the commentator lamenting, "It's difficult to think of anything quite so humbling as this defeat." The last screen, in words resembling the UK Independence Party's anti-European Union Brexit refrain to "take back control of our borders," announces, "Want to end this rail rip-off and take back control of Britain's railways?"

So xenophobic was the video that it elicited many hostile comments on the various social media accounts it was posted on.

In a press release accompanying the video, TSSA General Secretary Manuel Cortes complained, in a further nationalist diatribe, "The sad fact of Britain's railways under privatisation is that they are actually not private at all. Huge chunks of Britain's rail operating companies are now owned

by the French, the German and the Dutch governments."

Cortes condemned the Tory government and the Scottish National Party administration in Edinburgh for "their unpatriotic and misguided running down of UK rail." He appealed to Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May and her advisers to come up with a post-Brexit transport plan, stating, "Brexit has made Taking Back Control of train operating companies a vital economic necessity. Leaving the EU but leaving our rail operating companies in the control of EU countries to continue reaping the profits, would now be preposterous."

At the most basic level the video is full of lies and omissions. There is no mention of the Souter family's Stagecoach group—which became synonymous with the first wage-cutting transport privatisations—and now controls 25 percent of the rail market, nor of Richard Branson's Virgin Group. The Virgin East Coast franchise has raised fares by an average of 4.9 percent, the highest of any operator.

At the same time, the European Commission is advancing plans for the privatisation of large swathes of the EU's remaining state rail networks through legislation such as the Fourth Railway Package.

More importantly, the nationalist sentiments expressed in the video are not those of European workers—who have suffered the same austerity measures and attacks on wages and conditions as those in Britain—but are those of the trade union bureaucracy. Under the impact of the global economic crisis, the unions function as "partners" of corporate management in policing and increasing the exploitation of the working class. As the video and their activities testify, the unions' declared opposition to privatisation is purely verbal.

Workers will not find anywhere in the video a mention of the major role played by the unions in paving the way for the privatisation of British Rail by the Conservative government more than 20 years ago that has been almost universally acknowledged as a financial disaster. Instead, they diverted the overwhelming opposition to rail privatisation on the part of workers and passengers into support for Tony Blair's

Labour government, which then accelerated what the Tories had begun through a series of Public Private Partnerships (PPP). This included the infamous PPP contracts for the renovation of London Underground's infrastructure, which collapsed in debt at a cost of billions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, the private Train Operating Companies made it clear they would impose the economic crisis onto rail workers and the travelling public. They negotiated with the then Labour government significant reductions in services and protection of profits through "revenue support mechanisms."

The Labour government hired Lord McNulty to investigate how to increase profits and slash workers' wages and working conditions. He recommended the national rollout of driver-only trains (DOO)—with the consequent loss of thousands of train conductors' jobs. This is a major factor in the current dispute on Southern Railways and other rail companies. In 2012, when the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition adopted McNulty's recommendations, the rail unions quickly wound down protests after they were given a consultation role with the Rail Delivery Group.

Throughout this period, TSSA has played a particularly ignominious role. Rarely initiating any industrial action against the rail companies' attacks, when other rail strikes took place, it told its managerial and supervisory members not to break their contracts of employment, and to carry out any duties they were trained for.

The video is the logical outcome of the divisive nationalist perspective advocated by all the rail unions. The anti-foreigner rhetoric has been a consistent theme. During the 2009 dispute at Deutsche Bahn Schenker/EW&S over the introduction of a "work when required" scheme, rather than fighting for the unity of British and German workers who were opposing the threat of privatisation, the UK unions began a thinly veiled anti-German campaign. The unions attacked Deutsche Bahn for striving for "world domination," and demanded the defence of British economic interests against foreign competition.

In early 2016, the unions again attacked the Tory government from the right in their protests against the take-over of the Northern Rail franchise by Deutsche Bahn. In a TSSA April 1 press release "April Fool Alert: Germany Take Over Northern Rail Services," Cortes declared, "...don't be fooled today into thinking Deutsche Bahn are in business in Britain for our benefit when their objective is to make profits out of British commuters so they can subsidise fares at home.

"Only when we have A People's Railway, envisaged by Labour and owned by and run in the interests of the British people will we have lower fares and a proper integrated

network which will boost growth and stimulate a 21st century economy which properly empowers the north."

Later that month, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) complained that the "Union Flag-waving Conservative government has just handed over the operation of the North of England railways to the German state railway." Its stunt consisted of flying the German flag over various Northern Rail stations. There was no appeal to German workers for a joint offensive against privatisation.

The proposal of a "People's Railway" by Labour is a smokescreen. Corbyn does not represent a political alternative to the other parties of the corporate and financial elite. His track record as leader of the opposition has been to facilitate the Tory government's reactionary agenda and capitulate completely to his own party's right-wing.

His programme is not socialist, but the defence of the interests of British capitalism. At its annual conference last September, the Labour Party called for the nationalisation of the existing franchises, but only when they end—only five are due to expire before 2025. Its policy calls for a new "public operator" to reinvest the profits of private rail operators in fare reductions and rail infrastructure. It stressed that this would be cost-free since the state would only step in once the contracts had run out.

While TSSA supported the Remain in the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU—in nominal opposition to the RMT and Aslef rail unions—the video reveals the reactionary nationalist agenda uniting them all.

Their orientation to the EU is not from the standpoint of developing a unified movement of workers across Europe against its big business agenda, but on how best to serve the interests of British capital.

The endorsement of the video made by its TSSA paymasters reveals Momentum's reactionary political character. Its primary role is to steer the politically disaffected back into the Labour Party, which has—since its inception—been a bourgeois party devoted to the interests of British capitalism.



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