

UK: ASLEF drivers' union calls off Southern Rail strikes

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20 January 2017

The ASLEF train drivers union has called off the three-day strike on Southern Rail due next week. An overtime ban will also be lifted.

The planned action was over the company's plans to widen the use of driver only operated (DOO) trains. DOO is aimed at the reducing the role of conductors—who perform a critical safety role on trains—to that of revenue collectors and their eventual elimination from the railways.

The strike was called off following the announcement of fresh talks between ASLEF and Southern, which is owned by Govia Thameslink Rail.

ASLEF sabotaged the strike just days after some 1,000 drivers held a 48-hour stoppage beginning January 11 that brought Southern's operations to a halt.

The Southern rail network is one of the most critical in the country, with many passengers commuting to London. The action resulted in the firm having to withdraw more than 2,200 scheduled journeys, serving hundreds of thousands of people.

The announcement calling the strike off was made by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), who stated it would host the talks that began Wednesday. The talks are being chaired by TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady and Andy Meadows, the UK HR Director of Abellio. In a joint statement, O'Grady and Meadows said, "We are pleased that all parties have agreed to meet for meaningful talks."

Meadows' inclusion is significant as Abellio operates the Scotrail, Merseyrail and Greater Anglia private rail franchises. Scotrail has already enforced a partial DOO system, much of Greater Anglia's is DOO and Merseyrail is planning to introduce DOO on its new trains.

Conductors at Scotrail, which Abellio runs for the

Dutch national rail Nederlandse Spoorwegen, waged a determined struggle against DDO last year, holding a series of strikes that were eventually sabotaged by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT). Opposed to unifying the struggle of Southern GTR and ScotRail conductors, the RMT called off the ScotRail strikes and entered negotiations. The RMT claimed the outcome was "a major breakthrough in the battle against driver only operation." In reality, the driver will now open doors and conductors close them, leaving the company part way towards their goal of ending the conductors' safety role.

The RMT and ASLEF have worked to ensure that the struggle of drivers and conductors at rail franchises nationally have been divided and isolated. RMT conductors at Southern are set to hold a one-day stoppage on Monday—one day before the ASLEF three-day stoppage was to commence. While stating the strike was still going ahead, the RMT approached the TUC to be included in this week's talks.

The strikes by Southern workers follow those by post office workers, London Underground staff and British Airways cabin crew and point to growing mood of resistance in the working class to years of austerity and attacks on working conditions. In each case, workers are striking to protest attacks that have already been agreed to by the trade union bureaucracy.

The calling off of the Southern strike came as cleaning staff employed by Servest UK—an agency contracted to clean trains belonging to the Great Western Railway (GWR)—were due to begin a 48-hour strike Thursday. They are members of the RMT union and are striking over poor pay, bad working conditions and allegations of bullying. They are demanding to be employed as GWR staff and be subject to their pay and conditions.

The RMT announced it would suspend the strike if the company were to offer its members an improved contract.

The TUC and ASLEF called off the Southern strike almost immediately after Prime Minister Theresa May's Wednesday speech, in which she declared that Britain would leave the EU and withdraw from its Single Market on the basis of striking free trade agreements internationally. This is premised on a massive escalation in the assault on the working class, which has been ongoing for nearly a decade since the 2008 global financial crisis. The response of the TUC and ASLEF in calling off the Southern strike is a down payment by the unions in their collaboration in this class war offensive.

The government welcomed the move by the TUC/ASLEF, with transport secretary Chris Grayling supporting the inclusion of Meadows in the talks.



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