

UK: A conductor's appeal to Southern GTR drivers

Vote “no” in the “referendum” on Driver Only trains

8 February 2017

The Socialist Equality Party (UK) has received the following letter from a train conductor. He calls for drivers employed by Southern Govia Thameslink Railway to reject an agreement reached by management and the ASLEF train drivers' union. The sell-out deal was brokered by the Trades Union Congress.

Drivers on Southern GTR and conductors—the latter members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union—have been involved in a dispute with the company for nearly a year, in opposition to their efforts to impose Driver Only Operated trains (DOO). This policy—now accepted by ASLEF in the agreement—will result in the de-skilling of the conductor grade, the eventual loss of hundreds of conductors' jobs and is detrimental to public safety.

As a socialist and conductor with decades of experience, I urge you to vote “no” to the despicable sell-out negotiated in secret by ASLEF's Mick Whelan and Frances O'Grady of the TUC.

A decisive vote against would be a blow to efforts by the union leaders to drive a wedge between conductors and drivers that will enable Southern and the Conservative government to destroy conductors' jobs and then move on to targeting drivers.

A Department for Transport official said they were “grateful” to the TUC and ASLEF. They should be!

O'Grady and the negotiator, Andy Meadows of train company Abellio, issued a joint statement declaring a “breakthrough.” Meadows is fresh from imposing a form of Driver Only Operated trains at ScotRail, with the connivance of both ASLEF and the RMT.

Like many of you, I have fought my entire working life for unified struggles of all grades to defend jobs, working conditions and passenger safety. The majority

of those struggles have been against deals pushed through by the unions. The current struggle is by far the most critical since the privatisation of British Rail in 1996-97.

Whelan claims that his sell-out deal meets “the concerns of train drivers.” This is his first lie. It reflects the interests of private rail profiteers and union bureaucrats. As you know, it accepts the expansion of DOO by listing various circumstances in which a driver will be forced to operate the train on his own. Drivers on GTR have been put in the very situation they went out on strike to oppose. You are being asked by ASLEF to vote “yes” on a deal that will eliminate hundreds of your colleagues' jobs.

Whelan is claiming this is not a template for all other situations. Another lie. By calling off your strikes and urging a “yes” vote, he is reneging on ASLEF's commitment to oppose the extension of DOO.

Fundamentally, what is being decided is the fate of 6,500 conductors' jobs throughout the country and the future of the driving grade itself.

Conductors are colleagues you have spent many years working alongside. If they lose this job, many, if they can secure a new job at all, will end up working for minimum wage and face a collapse in living standards—threatening their homes, the future of their children and their health, which has already been impacted by decades of shift work and productivity drives.

This is the reality faced by those who accepted, on the RMT's recommendation, a switch to the new On Board Supervisors role and have lost control of the door procedures. A number are now reporting that their safety critical cards are being removed and others forced to work on lines they have no route knowledge

to work safely. This is the prelude to dismissal. They are not going to be paid to do nothing. Where DOO already exists on 30 percent of Britain's railways, a conductor has not been kept, even with reduced duties. Fact!

A letter from Southern to stakeholders describes the deal as protecting "our modernisation programme for the extension of driver controlled operation and the new OBS role which we have now implemented and is retained going forward as part of this agreement."

No trust can be placed in the Labour Party to oppose these attacks. Shadow Transport Secretary Andy McDonald said he hoped that "this agreement marks the beginning of a more inclusive way of conducting industrial relations in the future."

ASLEF's proposal comes after months during which drivers carried out six days of strikes that hit Southern GTR hard, which were greeted by conductors as the basis for a united fight against DOO throughout the country. To do so meant taking on not only Southern, but the courts and the Tory government—only to now see the strike mandate betrayed by those you pay over £50 a month to protect you!

ASLEF officials have said this is not a template for the rest of the railways, such as Merseyrail where conductors are being balloted against DOO. We all know this is a lie. If this deal is pushed through, it will be the Trojan horse for the destruction of the 20,000 jobs Lord McNulty, hired by the last Labour government, recommended back in 2009 and made Conservative government policy in 2012. If they succeed in eliminating conductors they still have another 13,500 jobs to go!

The recent loss of hundreds of driving jobs on the freight is a warning.

Drivers know their own job is under threat. London Overground removed conductors in 2013-14. Reports from staff suggest there is now testing of driverless train technology. Such tests are very advanced on London Underground. The model for the railway network is the Docklands Light Railway—bare minimum super-exploited staff and maximum profits. DLR train captains step in when mechanics fail and carry out what should be the jobs of a host of staff.

Will this vote be binding? ASLEF has declared this to be a "referendum." Will Whelan declare a "no" vote merely advisory and refuse to renew the strikes and

impose the deal regardless? This is a serious danger! These are the same scoundrels who, when supporting the referendum on the UK leaving the European Union, insisted that the "will of the people" must not be ignored. Now they are insisting on the right to ignore the will of their own members!

ASLEF's aim is to come to the defence of Southern GTR and the Conservative government in the post-Brexit situation, where Theresa May has declared her joint enterprise with Donald Trump is to smash up jobs, wages and working conditions and remove all restrictions on exploitation. This goes also for the RMT, who advised conductors to vote for a form of DOO on ScotRail and for Southern GTR conductors to sign over to the OBS role.

I urge a "no" vote as a rebellion against the union bureaucracy to end the artificial divisions between us. The rail unions are opposed to a united struggle by railway workers in the face of the bosses, who are united in the Rail Delivery Group. I urge a turn to the formation of rank-and-file committees elected at every depot to end the unions' control over the struggle at GTR.



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