

UK: Southern GTR drivers vote against union-backed sellout deal

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Drivers employed by Southern Rail voted by 54 percent to reject a rotten deal, engineered by the ASLEF union and the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

The deal would have enabled Govia Thameslink Rail (GTR), which runs the busy network, to enforce the expansion of Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains, transferring guards to so-called On Board Supervisors (OBS), as a prelude to their dismissal.

This principled stand by a majority of drivers comes despite immense pressure from management and the union to accept the deal. The drivers had already been involved in six days of strike action and an overtime ban against the very conditions ASLEF and the TUC hoped to enforce against them.

ASLEF and the TUC had hoped the loss of thousands of pounds in wages would enable them to impose these conditions, where management had failed. Nothing else can account for the fact that they were prepared to negotiate such an open sell-out with GTR.

The deal stated that the “driver is responsible for the control, movement and despatch of the train.” This in no way differs from the government’s adoption of Lord McNulty’s massive job cutting proposals in 2012 which specify that the “default” position for train operation is single manned.

ASLEF agreed to “restore the integrity and resilience of the service,” by accepting that Southern could run trains without a guard or OBS under “certain” circumstances—a list of which was so wide-ranging as to make the restriction meaningless. The circumstances included absence, lateness, absence before or during a service, no alternative cover, sickness, emergency leave, delayed on services whilst passing from one job to another or on route to start a service, displaced by late running, sickness or assault while working, driver or OBS error where OBS is left behind, where OBS has to leave service to deal with a passenger issue or civil emergency, and so on.

The union further accepted deployment of OBS will only occur in “degraded conditions,” and only if the OBS holds “relevant competency” (which is not guaranteed) they “may” then operate doors if the DOO technology fails. ASLEF have agreed a major upgrade of technical systems to ensure all services can operate as driver only, confirming the OBS is a temporary fix until the new technology is installed.

In a damning indictment of the potential dangers of the agreement, the deal has a clause enabling the exploration of the scope and feasibility of an indemnity scheme for drivers. In other words, it acknowledges the possibility that drivers could face criminal charges if passengers are injured or killed because of the expansion of DOO.

This can hardly be reassuring to drivers, much less the tens of thousands of passengers that are already treated worse than cattle on the Southern network—as many others across the country. Southern GTR provides damning proof that the government and private rail companies are willing to drive services into the ground and force the removal of vital safety workers to line the pockets of shareholders, with the taxpayer footing the bill.

Another key part of the deal is that hundreds of drivers losing their jobs due to “contraction” in the freight sector will be relocated to GTR. ASLEF put this in the deal as a further means of trying to induce drivers into accepting the deal, on the grounds that to do otherwise would block their soon to be redundant colleagues from getting jobs with GTR. But a deal reached with GTR over supposed job protection for one group of workers, that is to be achieved at displacing thousands of conductors, is as worthless as the paper it is written on.

The reality is that the ASLEF-TUC agreement was aimed at imposing a defeat on railway workers that would have become the blueprint throughout the UK. Its aim was to divide drivers from conductors, downgrade the conductors as a prelude to removing them altogether, and

then—having achieved this—come after the drivers themselves. The Rail Delivery Group that is organising the attack on the conductors' jobs wants driverless trains nationally as soon as the technology is in place.

The final section of the deal makes clear that management and the union are on the same side against workers. Titled “Restoration of positive relationships,” it declares, “Both parties accept that 2016 was a difficult year during which the previously positive and constructive working relations between the company, ASLEF and individual drivers was damaged by strikes and legal action.” It concludes, “GTR and ASLEF are keen to rebuild these relations.”

The TUC was brought in to help ASLEF negotiate this treacherous agreement because demands by Conservative government representatives to break the strike had failed. When any struggle threatens corporate profits, the TUC can be relied upon to impose the demands of big business.

Small wonder that the government and media congratulated ASLEF and the TUC for the deal, praising the rail union for its “sensible” and “moderate” approach, while denouncing continuing strikes by Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) drivers and conductors on GTR as the actions of “wreckers.” The TUC and ASLEF have given succour to the right-wing press to renew their offensive against any step taken by the working class to defend itself.

Despite the result, however, transport workers and commuters alike face real dangers. ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan claimed, “We understand and support the decision arrived at democratically by our members and will now work to deliver a resolution in line with their expectations.”

What he really means is that the union will try to make a few tweaks to the deal to push it through. The TUC has already said that the agreement is the best that workers can expect. The narrowness of the result will be used to browbeat those who voted against into acceptance, and then as a stick to beat other sections of workers.

Nor can any trust be placed in the RMT, despite its description of ASLEF's agreement as a “betrayal.” RMT General Secretary Mick Cash entered discussions with the company immediately after the sell-out was made public. He was left in no doubt by GTR chief Charles Horton that driver only targets for GTR services had been doubled since the conflict began last spring and that the OBS role would not be safety critical.

At a mass meeting of Southern conductors called to discuss the way forward, Cash announced that the RMT

were ready to call off a strike ballot by London Midland conductors (who work for the same company, Govia). This was under conditions in which a massive strike vote was expected, as conductors were resisting the introduction of security guards on trains ready to take over their roles.

Although management agreed to remove security from trains, it was a tactical retreat by Govia, who did not want to face joint strikes by all conductors in its franchises. This they calculated would make it easier to attack Southern GTR conductors. This divisive act was described by Cash as a “massive victory.”

This effectively removed London Midland workers from the battle, under conditions in which Merseyrail and Arriva Trains Northern conductors are balloting against the threat to their jobs by the introduction of DOO. Conductors on Merseyrail confront not only the private rail company who are introducing driver only trains, but the local Labour council who have given their stamp of approval.

Transport workers must draw the necessary conclusion from these events. The unions are not workers' organisations but an instrument of management. They cannot be trusted and must not be allowed to negotiate in the name of their members.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to begin discussions in every depot to prepare a fight back. This requires the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, bringing together conductors, drivers and all rail employees to defend their jobs, wages and conditions.

Above all, workers must recognise that they face a political battle. The vicious attack by the government and the media makes clear that the defence of workers' rights involves a fight against the entire state. This includes the Labour Party, which has not lifted a finger in defence of the Southern workers, despite the supposedly “left” leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.

What is needed is a new leadership and fighting organisation, based on an internationalist and socialist strategy. All workers that want to build rank-and-file committees and take up this battle should contact the Socialist Equality Party today.



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