

Southern railway workers in UK strike in the face of union sabotage

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Southern Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) conductors and drivers carried out a 24-hour strike on February 22. The walkout was the 29th strike called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) since last April.

The workers are opposing the moves by the private rail company to force conductors—who are already responsible for 30 different safety functions—into a new role as On Board Supervisors, with drivers taking over passenger door operations.

The expansion of Driver Only Operation (DOO) is a massive cost-cutting exercise by the Tory government and private train operators to terminate the safety role of the conductor. The strike took place in the wake of Southern GTR drivers voting down a sell-out deal negotiated in private with the company by train drivers' union, ASLEF, and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). ASLEF's leadership, backed by the company and the government, tried every trick in the book to pressure drivers into voting "yes." The deal would force drivers to take over door operations they had gone on strike against only weeks earlier, and which ASLEF had described as unsafe.

In response to the rejection by its members, ASLEF and its general secretary, Mick Whelan, rapidly moved to derail any unified struggle by drivers and conductors by blocking the resumption of drivers' strikes.

ASLEF officials claimed that the supposedly slim margin of defeat—the deal was rejected by a 54-46 percent margin—meant only minor tweaking was needed to gain membership approval. The union has entered private talks at a secret location with GTR management to bring an end to the dispute, this time without the involvement of the TUC.

ASLEF Assistant General Secretary Simon Weller said, "We could put strike dates on if we wish but it is

not where we want to be. I see no reason why we can't achieve a negotiated settlement that's acceptable to all our members. ... Obviously, we got it wrong. We're a democratic organisation ... and our members had a clear view on it. ... We got it wrong and I don't see that as a big problem ... we just have to get it right again."

ASLEF's effort to isolate the conductors' strike and divide a united opposition to DOO is mirrored by the RMT.

Ahead of the latest strike at Southern GTR, the RMT called off a ballot of conductors at Govia's other rail franchise at London Midland—serving Liverpool, Crewe, Birmingham throughout the Midlands and London Euston—just as the result was to be announced. Five hundred conductors were expected to return a massive vote to strike against the forced introduction of security contractors onto trains. The role of the contractors would be to shadow conductors and gradually take over the conductors' role.

Govia's London Midland section agreed to remove security from the trains in a temporary tactical retreat. Instead of powerful coordinated strikes, the RMT accepted the decision and did not even allow ballot figures to be announced. This isolation enabled the company and media to escalate attacks on strikers at Southern.

During the latest strike, Southern GTR management announced more trains were running than in previous strikes. The RMT reported that if more trains than normal are running on strike days, it was due to what it calls a "high risk scabbing operation."

In a letter to the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) chief inspector of railways, Ian Prosser, RMT General Secretary Mick Cash stated, "I have been made aware that Southern GTR are in the process of throwing together up to 40 contingency staff to work trains as a

second person during the proposed dispute day of Wednesday 22nd February by providing up to 40 volunteers, with a watered down two days in a class room training exercise.”

Cash described it as “Kamikaze mentality,” adding, “How or why they believe that they can produce a second person to work a train with just two days in a class room is a serious misunderstanding of their own managerial responsibilities in ensuring the safe working and passage of trains...”

He called on the regulator to “intervene and remind Southern GTR management of their health and safety standards and responsibilities in relation to the management of health and safety in operating a safe railway.”

Cash previously described the ORR, which issued a report saying DOO was safe, as “a department of the government made up of Tory appointees and funded by the transport industry. Despite their own reports highlighting over 20 serious safety failures they claim that, with remedial action, Driver Only Operation can be made safe.”

The RMT’s letter was riddled with appeals for GTR management to be sensible and negotiate a settlement, even as Southern CEO Charles Horton was boasting of a resounding victory over conductors and deploying a “kamikaze” strike-breaking operation.

The RMT also reported that ahead of the strike the company reissued reminders to staff over their “contractual” responsibilities to turn up for work and have threatened numerous sanctions against striking staff.

The RMT negotiators have entered one set of talks after another, only to be told that they must go back and force workers to accept GTR’s demands and call off strikes. While the RMT officials conspire with management to wear down railway workers, the company and the government are escalating their campaign to label strikers—who are not just fighting for job and income security but the safety of passengers—as greedy and indifferent to the riding public.

The right-wing media are again blaming the near collapse of the Southern franchise and the disastrous service they provide—subsidised by hundreds of millions of pounds of state money—on strikers. London Chamber of Commerce head Colin Stanbridge denounced rail and London Underground strikes for

interfering with the financial aristocracy’s global profit operations. The Chamber of Commerce in Eastbourne issued what it dubbed as a “Wanted” poster, calling for all parties involved in the strike to be locked in a darkened room and not come out until a deal is agreed.

While strikers saw the February 22 strike as a show of defiance against efforts to sell out their struggle—a deal Cash himself had called an “historical” betrayal—the RMT responded to the vote by insisting it was an internal affair of a fellow union and that the “RMT will now look to take that campaign into its next phase working with our sister rail unions” and the “wider trade union movement.”

ASLEF and the RMT’s efforts to come to an agreement with the company to get the GTR strikes off the agenda comes ahead of major strike ballots by conductors at two other franchises—Mersey Rail, serving Liverpool and surrounding areas, and Arriva Trains Northern, which runs services throughout northern England. The strike ballots are against the expansion of DOO services throughout the north.

Ballot results for both will be announced today. These take place alongside new strikes by drivers on London Underground (LU) Central and City lines and strike ballots for LU maintenance and night tube drivers.

This is a powerful basis for an offensive against the brutal austerity measures being carried out by government and big business. This can only be successful if workers take these struggles out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy.



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