

UK rail conductors strike at three companies to defend jobs and safety conditions

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Today's strike by conductors at three train companies—Arriva Rail Northern, Merseyrail and Southern Rail—to oppose the introduction of Driver Only Operated services (DOO), is a welcome development in the efforts by rail workers to oppose thousands of job losses and the undermining of public safety.

Last month, Southern GTR drivers voted down a sell-out deal, negotiated in private with the company by the train drivers' union, ASLEF, and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The deal, fully accepting DOO, followed a year of strikes by conductors and drivers at Southern, which runs services throughout the south of England. Following its rejection, Southern management and ASLEF have resumed private talks at a secret location.

The fact that workers—all members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT)—are striking at three companies over the same issue shows that the expansion of DOO is part of a massive cost-cutting exercise nationally. Led by the Tory government and the private train operators, its aim is to terminate the safety role of the conductor, presently responsible for more than 30 safety-critical tasks on board trains.

This is the thin end of the wedge. Recent studies by rail bodies are considering the introduction, pending technological developments, of fully automated trains, run without either conductors or drivers.

Arriva Rail Northern and Merseyrail—which run services in the north of England—both plan to introduce forms of DOO within three years. Arriva plans to introduce DOO trains as soon as next year. Merseyrail plans to run trains without conductors from 2020.

A circular by the RMT to its members last October stated that Arriva Rail Northern intended to introduce a form of DOO called Driver Control Operation (DCO). The circular stated the firm "plans to reduce the current number of guards [conductors], with at least 50% of the

current train services on the franchise being operated by the driver. Under DCO the driver will have full operational control and sole responsibility for all operational requirements, which include full door control. The introduction of this change is due to take place once the new rolling stock has been procured."

The strike at Merseyrail is going ahead after the company's request for an injunction failed in the High Court. Merseyrail argued the strike should not go ahead as the RMT's dispute was properly with Merseytravel—the passenger transport executive responsible for the coordination of public transport in the Liverpool City Region. It argued that the decision to introduce DOO trains was taken by local councillors rather than the rail firm, but this claim was rejected by the High Court judges.

Despite the incessant media propaganda against the strikers at Southern, passengers, who are forced to use the shoddy services run by the company, have consistently expressed sympathy with the struggle.

This is in recognition of the consequences of removing even more workers from a service that is already in chaos due to privatisation and cutbacks. As a result, Southern trains are regularly delayed and cancelled, with a massive impact on the economy and passengers' lives. The Southern rail network is one of the most critical in the country, with many passengers commuting to London. Those trains that do run offer a barely functioning and expensive service, with carriages often overcrowded. Southern is only the most glaring example of a situation that exists across the country.

The claim that removing conductors and eventually drivers will have no impact on public safety is a lie, as demonstrated by several recent incidents.

Last September, a collision and derailment occurred at Watford, with the driver of the derailed train effectively trapped in his cab, unable to assist passengers. This left

the conductor in charge of ensuring the safety and welfare of passengers, which included helping two injured commuters and escorting paramedics when they arrived. Regarding the importance of having both drivers and conductors on board, the RMT said in a statement that had the driver been “unable to make the emergency call to slow the northbound train, and the collision had occurred at 80 mph, then this could well have been a multi fatality incident.”

This month, a wall collapsed at Liverpool Lime Street, with debris strewn across four lines at the busy station. It was only due to nearby trains—one carrying 150 passengers came within seconds of colliding with tonnes of rubble—having a qualified conductor and driver on board, able to co-ordinate their responses, that a major disaster was averted.

To prosecute the struggle ahead, all rail employees must draw the lessons of the dispute so far. Workers are in a political struggle, with the Conservative government demanding that DOO is imposed as an integral part of the recommendations of the 2011 report by Lord McNulty, known as the “Rail Value for Money Study.” The recommendations will lead to slashing 20,000 jobs, the enforcing of backbreaking productivity increases and removal of the assumption of automatic annual pay increases.

The government, via the Crown Prosecution Service, is currently attempting to prosecute Merseyrail conductor Martin Zee for a 2015 accident even though he was exonerated in an internal Merseyrail inquiry. Prosecutors are using archaic legislation from 1861 to charge Zee with “endangering passengers”—which carries a potential two-year jail sentence—for the incident, which saw an elderly passenger fall into the tracks. In fact, Zee’s quick action likely saved her life. (See: “Defend Martin Zee! UK: Merseyrail conductor scapegoated over passenger safety”).

This vendetta against Zee is part and parcel of the constant campaign to denigrate and demonise conductors and create a climate for the attacks on jobs.

Meanwhile, the unions are dividing rail workers, between conductors and drivers, RMT and ASLEF, under conditions where the jobs, wages and conditions of all workers are under threat. Today it is the conductors. Tomorrow it will be the drivers.

The RMT described the rotten deal that ASLEF and the TUC tried to impose on Southern drivers as a “historical betrayal.” A 2015 joint agreement signed by both the RMT and ASLEF committed them to oppose the

expansion of DOO in any form, and to fight to reverse it where it already existed. However, the RMT then insisted that the deal was an internal affair of ASLEF’s, thereby blocking any common struggle by the embattled rail workers.

Nor can rail workers win their struggle by looking to the Labour Party or a future Labour government. Labour is a party of the City of London, austerity and war. It was the last Labour government which commissioned the McNulty report and framed its terms of reference. The election of “left” Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has made no difference to the party’s right-wing programme.

As the case of Merseyrail demonstrates, the move to impose DOO is being carried out in collaboration with local transport authorities, which are largely under the control of Labour-run councils.

Corbyn calls for the “nationalisation” of rail franchises and the creation of a “People’s Railway.” But this is premised on the state taking over franchises only when existing franchises end. Yet only five of these are due to expire before 2025!

What is required is a new leadership, new organisations of struggle, and a new political strategy. Workers in every sector and every industry, including those employed in health, education and the London Underground, are under attack with relentless assaults on jobs, wages and conditions.

Rail workers should elect rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the trade unions. These committees should reach out to health workers, teachers, steelworkers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class, to wage a common a counter-offensive in defence of the social rights of all workers.

The Socialist Equality Party will offer every support to workers in establishing such organisations of struggle, and we appeal to railway workers to contact us.



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