

For a unified struggle of drivers and conductors

Vote “no” to the ASLEF sell-out deal at UK’s Southern GTR rail!

The Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The Socialist Equality Party (UK) urges drivers to vote “no” and reject the train drivers’ union ASLEF’s sell-out deal worked out in private with Southern Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) management.

The latest rotten agreement fully accepts the introduction of Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains—which drivers and conductors have bitterly opposed in many strikes over the last year—and is the second attempt by ASLEF in a month to force through a sell-out behind the backs of its members. The first deal was reached with management, in private talks, under the auspices of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The result of the ballot on this second deal is due to be announced April 3.

An indication of its anti-worker nature is that it has the full backing of the Conservative government. This is a government whose attitude towards rail workers was made clear by Department for Transport director of rail franchise, Peter Wilkinson, who said in a meeting last year that those opposing DOO should “get the hell out of my industry” and drivers and conductors be given “bloody noses.”

ASLEF has reached agreement with the same GTR management that has used the courts to block workers exercising their democratic right to strike and used the right-wing media to vilify and ridicule them.

To vote the deal down again would send out a strong message of solidarity to Southern conductors who are due to strike, for the 31st time, on April 8.

The ASLEF union bureaucracy described the new deal as expressing the will of its members. This is a lie. The will of the membership was for strike action to resist DOO. By ignoring the previous referendum result and refusing to return to strike action, ASLEF are carrying out only “the will” of GTR management.

The new agreement does not differ in any significant way from that previously rejected. Both accept DOO, despite the ASLEF leadership signing a 2015 joint letter with the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), pledging to their memberships that not only would they oppose DOO in all its forms, but they would fight to reverse it where it currently exists. This declaration came in the aftermath of their collaboration in the forcing through of DOO on London Overground routes, leading to the elimination of 130 conductors’ jobs.

Not long after their joint declaration, both unions colluded again to impose a form of DOO on ScotRail.

In announcing the latest deal, GTR human resources manager Andy Binden said he was “pleased.” ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan said, “This agreement has the full support of the negotiating team and the executive committee, and offers solutions to our concerns, as well as restoring the confidence of all parties and the travelling public.”

In other words, the opposition of drivers to DOO and the long-term threat to Southern conductors’ jobs is being steamrollered. Restoring the “confidence of all parties” means enforcing the policy of the government and enabling the company to increase its profits at the expense of the jobs, terms and conditions of drivers and conductors. The imposition of DOO will have dire consequences for the safety of the travelling public, who already suffer daily under the understaffed, shoddy and expensive service Southern is allowed to get away with running.

Utilising ASLEF’s naked capitulation to every demand of management, the RMT is attempting to boost its own credentials as a “fighting” and “membership”-led union. The RMT has been assisted in this by the pseudo-left Socialist Party, which has supporters in leading positions

on the RMT executive.

Contrary to the claims of the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party that the RMT is leading a fight, it is collaborating with the private rail franchises in imposing the recommendations of Lord McNulty to slash 20,000 jobs, massively increase productivity and end automatic inflation-linked pay rises.

While making criticisms of both ASLEF sell-out deals, the RMT demands a seat at the table to try force GTR to accept the ScotRail formula of DOO, under which drivers release doors and conductors close doors. This is only a prelude to the full imposition of DOO at a later date. One of the main levers of attack against Southern drivers by the company and right-wing media is that DOO already exists on large sections of the South East England network. That this is the case is due entirely to the joint treachery of the RMT (and its forerunner, the National Union of Railworkers) and ASLEF, which collaborated with previous governments in imposing DOO on 30 percent of Britain's railways.

The importance of the stance taken by Southern drivers in voting down the ASLEF/management deal was seen in the strikes on March 13 by conductors at Southern, Merseyrail and Arriva Trains Northern, against the imposition of DOO. A unified strike between conductors and drivers at all three companies was sabotaged by the RMT and ASLEF. But in a powerful demonstration of solidarity and class unity, the divide-and-rule strategy of the unions was rejected by ASLEF Merseyrail drivers, who rejected union advice and refused to cross picket lines mounted by RMT conductors. This prevented Merseyrail management from being able to provide any real service during the strike.

Just days after the unified action of rail workers in Liverpool, a jury in the city threw out the Crown Prosecution Service's attempted frame-up of Merseyrail conductor Martin Zee. Despite Zee's carrying out the correct door procedure, as laid down in the rule book, a passenger was injured because of a blind spot on a curved platform. Zee immediately came to the rescue of the passenger, again confirming the importance of the safety role of the conductor and the serious implications of running DOO trains without a conductor.

While ASLEF officials are touring depots, attempting to browbeat drivers into voting "yes" to their sell-out, on Tuesday the RMT announced a further 24-hour strike at Southern, Merseyrail and Arriva Trains Northern, which will take place only *after* the ASLEF ballot result—on April 8.

The sole purpose of these efforts is to give the RMT and management more time to concoct their own sell-out deal, along the lines of that negotiated at ScotRail. Announcing the action at Merseyrail, the RMT complained that the company had rejected the unions' "conciliatory approach" in talks held on Monday, adding, "There is ample time between now and April 8th for genuine talks to take place and for a safe and sustainable deal that protects the future safety across Merseyrail services to be put in place. The company should take up that offer of further talks as a matter of urgency."

Another "no" vote is just the beginning. This whole experience has demonstrated that the unions function as tools of the rail bosses, the Conservative and Labour politicians and the profit demands of the City of London. To stop the sabotage by ASLEF, RMT and the TUC, rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-company unions, to unite Southern, Merseyrail and Arriva Northern workers with all rail employees and workers throughout the transport sector who face similar attacks on their working conditions and livelihoods. A call for support must be made to passengers—who want trains staffed with qualified drivers and conductors. Passengers have consistently backed strikes—despite Southern's efforts to blame its workforce for a worsening service, which is entirely the outcome of the failed privatisation of the rail network.

Such a struggle must be unified with workers in health, education and local government who are seeing their jobs, wages and conditions destroyed under the Conservative government's austerity programme.

This industrial mobilization must be combined with the fight for a mass political movement of the working class based on a socialist program, including the transformation of the rail companies into publicly owned utilities to serve public, not profit, interests.



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