

UK: Southern GTR train drivers speak in opposition to rail union sell-out deal

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Over the past two weeks, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters have distributed copies of the statement “For a unified struggle of drivers and conductors: Vote ‘no’ to the ASLEF sell-out deal at UK’s Southern GTR rail!” to rail workers at depots in London, Brighton and the Midlands.

They were warmly received by drivers, conductors and dispatch staff throughout the Southern GTR franchise and its London Midland sister franchise, who are opposed to the forced elimination of the role of the conductor and the introduction of unsafe Driver Only Operated trains (DOO).

In February—after conducting many strikes in opposition to DOO—Southern GTR drivers voted down a rotten sell-out deal reached by ASLEF with management. That deal fully accepted the introduction of DOO. Within a month, the union concocted another rotten deal—once again accepting DOO and all the attacks it entails—with the ballot result to be announced April 3.

In wide-ranging discussions, rail workers expressed their discontent with the government, Southern GTR and the divisive policies of the trade unions. The SEP’s call for a unified struggle of all rail staff against the Conservative government-backed attacks on jobs and working conditions, and the necessity for a fight against ASLEF’s collaboration in imposing DOO, was listened to attentively by many workers.

At London Victoria station, one driver who opposed the new ASLEF deal said the union leadership acted in their own interests, “not in the interests of its members.” He said he had concluded from many years of experience with the trade unions that they operate a “divide and conquer policy” over their members.

Another driver described the issues as “we pay their [the union leaderships’] wages and they have to do

what we tell them.” He said that if the union leaders would not do so, “then we have to fight and force them to do what we want.” After discussing the call in the SEP statement for rank and file committees independent of the trade unions to be established, he responded that this “would be very difficult,” adding it would be a “hard” fight. He said he would read the statement “with interest.”

Another driver said he had “already voted ‘No,’ but we need leaders who will fight. That means changing the leadership of ASLEF.”

Referring to DOO, a driver said he too had voted “No” because he would not be forced to work “under these terrible conditions.” Another said he voted already and it was for “No,” “even though the union said vote ‘Yes,’ because after DOO it’s driverless. The fight is now.”

A Southeastern trains driver (part of the same franchise working out of London Victoria) agreed the task was “uniting all the staff from different companies, but why is it not done already?” he asked. The driver said he was “surprised” by the SEP’s attitude to ASLEF, but “would read the statement.”

Another driver opposed to the sell-out explained the reason he voted “Yes” was because, if “we were just fighting the company that would be different but we are not, we are fighting the government.” He argued that if the government fined the union then, “we can’t win on our own.”

Another Southern driver said it was not only rail workers being hit, “It is also the National Health Service that is under attack.”

Workers at GTR’s sister franchise, London Midland, told campaigners that the SEP statement had been seen by many rail workers and been printed out and distributed throughout the rail network. It had also been

circulated via social media.

At the main depot in Brighton on the south coast of England, drivers and conductors working for Southern Rail expressed their opposition to attacks by the employers and the failure of the unions to oppose them.

Conductor Jeni said, “We’re really together here against what’s happening. Everyone knows the bosses have sacked conductors across the country on one [train] line after the other. Here in Southern many trains are driver-only already. The unions have stood by and let it happen.”

“Last year Southern Rail made 27 percent profit. How come they get all the money and then want to drive us into the ground?”

Jamie, a driver, said he had already voted “No” to the latest ASLEF deal. “For years drivers and conductors were kept apart. Now we have come together. I think that’s because drivers realise trains could be run without drivers too. We need to find a different way to get back at the train companies because what has been going on hasn’t worked.”

“It’s the same at the council where my wife works. She is at risk in her job. They are destroying the services people depend on and handing them over to private companies who are only interested in making money. Something has to give.

“I think your ideas about action committees are good. We have to do something different. Get working class people to stand up and see they don’t have to put up with all the rubbish being thrown at them and to understand they are able to take control.”

SEP campaigners also distributed among rail workers hundreds of copies of the statement demanding the release of the 13 Indian Maruti Suzuki workers. These have been framed-up and sentenced to life sentences by the auto giant. Many drivers and conductors expressed concern about the fate of the Suzuki workers, and said they would sign the online petition demanding their release.



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