Southern GTR train drivers in UK vote down union sell-out again

Build new organisations of struggle to unify rail workers

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Drivers have voted down—for the second time—a sell-out deal cooked up behind the scenes by the drivers' union ASLEF and Southern Govia Thameslink Rail (GTR). The deal, which the Conservative government fully backs, seeks to impose unsafe Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains on Southern's network.

The deal was first rejected by the drivers in March by a narrow majority of 54 percent. This week's vote was by a narrower margin, with 372 drivers (51.8 percent) against to 346 (48.2 percent).

This testifies to the immense pressure placed on drivers by the ASLEF, Southern and the media.

Drivers and rail conductors have waged a bitter struggle against Southern's plans and the latest "no" vote is another blow to management, which was confident that ASLEF could finally wear its members down and deliver a 'yes' vote.

GTR runs three major rail franchises—Southern Rail, Southeastern and London Midland—and is the UK's busiest rail operator, running critical routes out of London and Birmingham. The Conservative government, whose aim is the removal of all 6,000 conductors from the rail network, requires DOO to be fully achieved on the GTR franchise.

Despite cosmetic changes, the new deal enabled GTR to enforce the expansion of DOO trains, making conductors On Board Supervisors (OBS) as a prelude to dismissal.

In response to the "No" vote, ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan once again announced his intention to re-enter negotiations. "We understand and support the decision arrived at in a democratic vote," he said.

What a lie! ASLEF will force workers to ballot on another rotten agreement until the union executives get the result they want and suppress all opposition to DOO.

After launching a joint campaign with the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) against DOO in November 2015, and to eliminate it where it already exists, ASLEF now declares DOO is an acceptable form of train despatch.

An RMT-produced dossier last summer declared, "Since January 2011 there have been 10 serious incidents at the passenger/train interface (PTI) that have been or are subjected to investigation by the UK's national investigation body the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB)... Eighty percent of these incidents have involved services being operated in driver-only operation (DOO) without a second on-board safety critical worker, a guard or train manager."

The second attempt by the union to ram through a sell-out agreement makes it clear that rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of this struggle in their own hands. Rail workers should elect rank-and-file committees, independent of all the pro-corporate unions to fight for a united struggle against the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and the Tories. Such committees must overcome all the artificial divisions imposed by the rail unions to divide and weaken workers and sabotage one strike after another.

Despite their verbal posturing against DOO, ASLEF and the RMT have facilitated its introduction and other attacks on working conditions for years.

ASLEF refused to oppose the removal of 130 conductors from London Overground in 2013/14, with the RMT collaborating to ensure a trouble-free destruction of the conductor grade through

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redundancies and transfers. On ScotRail last winter, the RMT agreed that drivers would open doors and conductors close them—a step towards removing conductors altogether.

The RMT has done everything possible to isolate its conductor members, who work on the same trains as Southern drivers, from waging a joint struggle. They sought to force conductors to sign up to the new OBS role last December, saying it was in their best interests ahead of a threat by the company to sack them. This instruction was given while conductors were still engaged in strikes. Most of the 30 days of strikes by RMT conductors at Southern have been limited to 24 hours at a time, on days when drivers have not been on strike.

ASLEF refuses to ballot its members for strikes at any other train company where DOO is planned. This is brought into sharp focus by this Saturday's strikes being held by conductors against DOO at three train companies—Arriva Trains Northern, Merseyrail and Southern GTR.

On March 13, during the first day of strikes by conductors at the three companies, ASLEF members at Merseyrail defied the union and refused to cross picket lines. Their action expressed the desire for a unified struggle. Without such a joint offensive, the rail companies will succeed in picking rail workers off one section at a time.

The sabotage of the rail unions has emboldened the bosses to escalate their attacks. The Department for Transports has advanced a Rail Capability Plan, to create "high-value, low-cost railway innovations" to drive down "operational expense," not constrained "by existing railway standards" and delivering what it calls "a high-value, low-cost railway." The plan lays out the stages they will go through to arrive at what they call "Autonomous" trains. These are "Milestone A-Semi-automatic operation, Milestone-B Driverless operation, Milestone C-Unattended operations, Milestone D-Autonomous trains."

At the same time, the government-controlled Office of Road and Rail Regulation is threatening 1,000 track renewal workers' jobs on Network Rail (the state sponsored company who maintain tracks and signalling). This follows the RMT's cancelling of two national strikes by 16,000 Network Rail workers in 2015. In return for a small pay rise, the RMT agreed to be part of an "efficiency and Improvement Project" to deliver savings and efficiencies.

A basic principle that has guided the struggles of the working class is the understanding that "an injury to one is an injury to all." As the dispute over DOO demonstrates, the union bureaucracy is totally opposed to any such principles of basic class solidarity. Throughout the world, unions today function as arms of management, defending the profit interests of capitalists, and cannot be described in any meaningful sense as working class organisations.

Rail workers must break the stranglehold of the unions by creating their own organisations of struggle. Such rank-and-file bodies can create the basis for a genuine unification of workers, establishing lines of communication and common activity across all workplaces throughout the public and private sector.

The government's active support for the attack on rail workers makes clear that the defence of workers' rights involves a fight against the state and its parties. This includes the Labour Party, which, despite the self-proclaimed "left" leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, are collaborating in local councils throughout the UK with private transport companies and the government to obtain new trains that are DOO enabled.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for a workers' government, based on socialist policies. These include the nationalisation of public transportation, so that it can be run in the interests of the travelling public and rail workers and not the major corporations.

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