

“What we need is a national stoppage”

Striking conductors in UK denounce attacks on rail network safety

Our reporters
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On Saturday, around 2,000 conductors at three private rail franchises struck for 24 hours in opposition to the planned introduction of Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains in the United Kingdom. The strike at Southern Govia Thameslink Rail (GTR), Arriva Trains Northern and Merseyrail was called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union.

Conductors and guards at Southern have been involved in a bitter struggle against government-backed management for over a year. Arriva Rail North and Merseyrail have refused to relent on plans to introduce DOO over the next three years.

Merseyrail is procuring a new £460 million fleet of trains by 2020, designed to enable drivers to entirely control the opening and closing of doors—one of the main roles of conductors who are trained in up to 35 safety critical tasks. The plan, if implemented, will result in the loss of 220 conductors’ jobs.

The strike followed last week’s vote by drivers at Southern GTR, who for a second time voted down a sell-out deal cooked up by the ASLEF drivers union and Southern GTR—a deal which fully accepted the concept of DOO trains on Southern’s network.

Were DOO to be implemented by all the rail companies planning its introduction, it would lead to the eventual elimination of 6,000 conductors from the railways.

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. According to RMT northwest regional organiser John Tilley, ASLEF drivers again “refused to cross the picket line” of conductors Saturday.

Such action conflicts with the RMT bureaucracy as much as it does with ASLEF. No joint strikes are being demanded by the RMT at any rail company, with ASLEF

drivers at Southern again working Saturday—despite rejecting the latest deal—as their conductor colleagues struck.

As the strike began, RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said, “[W]e repeat our call to Southern, Northern and Merseyrail to cut out the window-dressing and the spin and concentrate their efforts on negotiating agreements with the union.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters distributed copies of the Socialist Equality Party statement “Southern GTR train drivers in UK vote down union sell-out again: Build new organisations of struggle to unify rail workers” on picket lines in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Bradford and Doncaster.

At the Selhurst depot in London, a driver employed by Southern rail described how unsafe the DOO system is. He said, “I had an incident already where someone was trapped between the platform-train interface. No station staff were on the platform. I was looking at the small monitors [showing the length of the platform]. I saw almost nothing. About six coaches down, I thought I saw something, a passenger trapped, but the monitors were not clear. But if I walk down to the incident, my train would be delayed 10 minutes...So I waited in the cab until someone ran out to me and alerted me that a girl fell in the gap. I could just have closed the doors and gone, but I thought to myself, wait, let’s just wait and see what happens.”

Six strikers manned the picket line at Victoria station in Manchester.

John said a driver is currently being prosecuted in Hayes and Harlington in London for an incident on a DOO train, adding, “There is all this talk of new technology, but we keep having incidents on DOO trains.” He said of ASLEF’s General Secretary, who has

agreed to two sell-out deals, “Mick Whelan’s position may become untenable.”

Bill, a conductor for 26 years, said many drivers opposed DOO. “The close ASLEF vote [by Southern drivers] against DOO was misleading, because those who voted also included drivers already operating one-man trains. In fact, 40 percent of Southern trains already operate DOO.”

He continued, “Due to having separate franchises and contracts after privatization, the railways have been fragmented, so by law we can only strike on a company-by-company basis.” He added, “We’re going backwards, to the days of the lump [no contracts] in the building industry and the labour pool on the docks.”

Alan, a driver in the RMT union, said the struggle they were engaged in was “difficult and because of the legalities, they’re picking us off.”

He said, “I think we need mass action, an uprising, a revolution,” and he thought it “unlikely” that the trade unions would lead this.

At Manchester Piccadilly station, Jack, a conductor, said, “It’s divide and rule, what the unions are doing. It creates divisions and suits the employers. ASLEF keeps having referenda, until they get what they want.”

Another conductor Phil added, “I think they should have gone on strike together, drivers and conductors. Because we still have conductors, there are very few incidents of passengers being injured or fatalities. What doesn’t get highlighted is how many incidents are averted by the driver and conductor working together.”

Phil was concerned about the bombing of Syria the previous day by the United States and the threat of war against Russia: “If [Hillary] Clinton would have got in she would have started the war already.”

Jim, who has worked for station retail for 20 years said, “If they are getting rid of safety critical jobs, ticket office jobs will also go. This de-staffing began with the McNulty report,” which was commissioned by the last Labour government.

At Liverpool Lime Street station, car horns were hooted in support of the picket, with many passers-by giving vocal support.

Tony, a conductor said, “What we need is a national stoppage. Everyone needs to be out. If everyone had been out this strike would have been won and over.”

Jack, a conductor with Arriva Northern Rail, said the recent collapse of a wall—sending tons of rubble onto the tracks—at Lime Street and the prompt response of the conductor and driver showed that a second safety critical

member of staff on every service was essential.

Richard said conditions in Britain were “heading back to Victorian times, with full-time jobs on 37 hours replaced with zero hour contracts and pensions under attack.” He stated his opposition to recent imperialist wars, saying his son had been in the army and had fought in the “unjust wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Janet, a pensioner supporting the pickets, said railway operators were breaking the law in effectively denying disabled people access to the new DOO trains. She felt that many union leaders could “lose their jobs through workers getting rid of them.”

A rail worker in Bradford said she agreed with the SEP statement that the unions were only engaging in token action against DOO. She was not on strike and expressed frustration that many other rail workers were not. A few years ago, she recalled, “they [the unions] had conductors out one day and drivers out the next. Why don’t they get us all out at once—then it will have an impact?”

Comparing the treatment of the NHS junior doctors since the defeat of their strike last year, she said. “Look at how they are getting treated—long hours and low pay. We need to unite to stop them picking us off like that.”

SEP campaigners distributed copies of the International Committee of the Fourth International statement “Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers!” The statement denounces the life sentences imposed on 13 Maruti Suzuki workers, and the three-to-five years’ imprisonment of another 18 employees handed down by an Indian court on March 18.

In Liverpool one picket said, “The attack on these workers is an attack on all workers.” A conductor at Manchester Victoria said, “We are heading for a situation like that facing the Maruti Suzuki workers here. Look what happened to Martin Zee.”

Zee is a Merseyrail conductor who was framed up and taken to court—before being found innocent by a jury last month—following an accident at a rail station in Birkenhead.



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