

New strikes in the UK against Driver Only Operated trains

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Industrial action by rail workers across Britain against the imposition of Driver Only Operated trains (DOO) continued last weekend.

Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members struck for three days July 8-10 at Arriva Trains Northern and staged one-day walkouts at Merseyrail and Southern GTR on July 10. A further one-day strike is planned for Merseyrail workers on the July 23. An indefinite overtime ban by Southern train drivers in the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) union announced last month remains in force.

These are the latest actions in a long-standing dispute over rail companies' efforts to impose DOO. Some 6,000 conductors jobs are threatened by the move, imperilling the safety of millions of passenger throughout the rail network. Strikes were first launched by the RMT and ASLEF in April 2016, in the face of court injunctions against strikers.

Since then, the unions have worked to limit the struggle to a series of intermittent one and two-day walkouts, with repeated offers to the rail companies to call off action and enter talks. What strikes have been called have been plagued by last-minute cancellations and suspensions by the unions, including a five-day walkout in May 2016 that was called off after just three days.

The RMT and ASLEF have worked assiduously to divide rail workers, keeping strikes of conductors and drivers separate for the most part. Following attempts by ASLEF to end its dispute with Southern GTR and impose a sellout deal, RMT leaders denounced their fellow union before immediately backtracking and insisting that the deal was ASLEF's internal affair.

In March, many ASLEF drivers employed by Merseyrail defied the union and refused to cross pickets of RMT conductors.

The recent strikes are the first following an undeclared amnesty by the unions to the rail firms in the weeks

running up to the June 8 general election. A May 30 walkout planned by RMT conductors was cancelled with a statement by General Secretary Mick Cash that cited "heightened safety and security alerts on our transport services" following the May 22 Manchester bombing. ASLEF suspended a two-week overtime ban on Southern GTR planned for June 3. During the election campaign the unions called off strikes to prevent compromising Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's "safe pair of hands" pitch to British capital by associating him with the struggles of the working class.

The amnesty was used by the RMT and ASLEF leaderships to turn, again, to negotiations with the rail companies. These talks have only allowed Southern, Northern and Merseyrail management to escalate strikebreaking plans and impose regimes of intimidation—while the union bureaucrats work out how best to extract concessions from their members.

The unions' claims of "progress" being made at the talks are a lie. Rail companies, backed by the Conservative government, have not moved an inch on their demands throughout the dispute.

In response, the unions have taken every opportunity to force through sellout deals. After a series of negotiations between the RMT and Southern in late 2016, the company issued three-month termination of contract notices to all conductors who refused to sign new contracts relegating them to the more easily dispensable role of On Board Supervisor (OBS). The RMT advised its members to accept. ASLEF has now twice presented its members with rotten deals—voted down by drivers—following private negotiations with Southern.

The latest strikes do not stem from any militant turn by the union leadership, but from the determination and courage of the drivers and conductors. A similar resolve exists among workers in the entire rail industry, who have repeatedly given huge mandates for strike action. Were a

genuine worker's organisation with the resources of the RMT/ASLEF to step forward, it could count on the support of all of these sections in launching a national offensive against the rail companies' and Conservative government's cost-cutting agenda.

Far from leading any such struggle, ASLEF and the RMT have succeeded—through their numerous climb-downs, concessions, and sabotage of strikes—in opening up wider sections of the rail workforce to attack. As of December 2016, a third of all UK trains are already DOO. Thanks to a cancelled RMT strike and deal in August of that year, ScotRail now runs on a system whereby drivers open train doors and guards (for now) close them. This is a step towards the eventual elimination of the conductor role.

Merseyrail intends to introduce DOO trains by 2020 and Northern by next year. South West Trains, the largest operator in the UK, bought new DOO-fitted trains this February. How the network is operated will be officially announced after the franchise changes hands this August. The new franchise holders, First Group and MTR, have both carried out attacks on the conductor role in other ventures. MTR forced the redundancy of 130 conductors on the London Overground in 2013, following their betrayal by the RMT. First Group—through Great Western—runs DOO trains on the same system as ScotRail on its express route around Paddington and Reading and has begun moving trains used on these lines to the Western parts of its network.

Responding to a letter from the RMT, South West Trains have publicly refused to commit to retaining conductors on all their trains.

Greater Anglia will be introducing new DOO-fitted trains between January 2019 and September 2020. The company claimed that the doors on these models could be operated by either the driver or the conductor. However, the RMT discovered in May that this was not the case as the design did not practically allow operation by the conductor.

Rail workers should be under no illusions as to the ultimate intentions of the conglomerates who run the private rail franchises. All are working in line with the proposals of Lord McNulty, who delivered a report in 2009 commissioned by the then Labour Government, calling for billions of pounds to be slashed on the railways through the removal of at least 20,000 jobs, the implementation of wage cuts and vast increases in productivity. He specified DOO operation as the norm and the privatisation of track and signal maintenance in

order to bring cost cutting incentives into these areas. His conclusions were made Conservative policy in 2012.

The massive funding cuts, the largest since 2008, planned for Network Rail (the state-funded body in charge of managing infrastructure) over the next two years are part of this agenda. At least 1,000 safety-critical rail renewal jobs are at risk, with the RMT warning that the plans will endanger passengers' lives. The RMT's apparent concerns over jobs and safety, however, find no expression in their actions.

At Merseyrail, where the company intends to transfer its Engineering Function to Stadler Rail Services UK, who have refused to rule out redundancies as part of the new contract, and at Babcock Rail, where 89 jobs are slated for redundancy, the RMT opposes only "compulsory redundancies." The union agreed to be part of an "efficiency and Improvement Project" in 2015, following the cancellation of two national strikes by 16,000 Network Rail workers in return for a small pay rise.

The threat to Network Rail workers' jobs and resumption of strikes at Southern, Northern and Merseyrail signals a new stage in this struggle. If this fight is to be won, rail employees and workers throughout the transport sector must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracy, which seek to unite all rail workers across all companies and grades. The Socialist Equality Party will offer every support in establishing such organisations of struggle, and we appeal to railway workers to contact us.



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