

# UK rail workers to continue strikes against plans for Driver Only Operated trains

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Train drivers and guards in the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are to strike from September 1 in a long running dispute against the introduction of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains by the three transport operating companies (TOCS) – Southern GTR, Northern Rail and Merseyrail.

At Southern GTR and Northern Rail, the industrial action consists of two strike days on September 1 and September 4 with Merseyrail involved in a three-day stoppage over the same period including September 3.

The latest round of strike action takes place against the background of concerted efforts by both the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and the RMT to end the dispute and prevent its extension to other private operators on the network.

Following the last round of strike action by RMT on the three franchises in July, the union and ASLEF called off strike action on Southern GTR planned for the start of August in return for direct talks with Conservative government Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling.

ASLEF and the RMT met separately with Grayling. Prior to the talks on July 21, RMT general secretary Mick Cash stated: “We will also be asking that he pull back from engineering a Southern-style confrontation across the network, including on South West Trains and Abellio Anglia.

“Today’s talks will show us whether he is sincere and bringing fresh thinking to the table or just going through the motions. RMT is entering the talks with positive proposals for resolving the disputes.”

In the press release issued by Cash in the aftermath of the talks, the government’s position was presented as good coin: “Regarding DOO on other companies the Secretary of State claimed that he was not sitting on

companies telling them what to do and we are therefore writing to all of the relevant companies seeking urgent discussions.”

The attempt to present the government as an honest broker and its intervention as a precondition for a compromise settlement over DOO with the private train operating company (TOC) is fraudulent and has yielded not a single concession.

Further talks with Southern, Northern and Merseyrail broke down after company representatives made clear they were not prepared to entertain any retreat. If anything, the demobilisation of rail workers by the unions has only served to embolden the TOCS. Merseyrail’s managing director Jan Chaudhry-van der Velde has gone as far as to claim that train safety would be enhanced with the removal of guards.

Citing a recent industry report he said, “There is no additional risk for passengers boarding and alighting Driver Controlled Operation/Driver Operated Only trains, and indeed that trains without a guard actually appear to lower overall dispatch related safety risk to passengers.”

This has only made other major operators on the national rail network equally determined to extend the introduction of DOO. Greater Anglia trains, the franchise which is run by Abellio/Mitsui, is intent on introducing new rolling stock, specifically designed to ensure that the train doors are operated by the driver only, on its services by 2019.

At South West Trains, the government awarded the franchise to First MTR which it took over from August 20. This consortium--a partnership between First Group and MTR--comprises companies with a track record of operating train services without guards at their other franchises. From 2019, it will provide 90 new trains with doors that can be operated by the driver. South

Western Railway is one of the busiest franchises in Europe with 650,000 passengers and 1,600 trains per day.

The mobilisation of these key sections of rail workers would open up new fronts against the TOCS and the government. The RMT is opposed to such a mobilisation of a joint offensive by rail workers, who face the same attacks on the terms and conditions of work and ultimately their livelihoods.

At Greater Anglia, the RMT issued strike ballots to affected guards and drivers which will close on September 12. The union has offered the concession that its “door remains open” to allowing Greater Anglia to transfer the opening of doors to the train driver as long as guards/conductors retain overall operational responsibility and control of the train despatch. But the company has decided it will proceed regardless.

At South West Trains, the RMT is already sitting on a strike mandate by guards against breach of agreements by the former TOC, Stagecoach. The ballot returned a majority for strike action by 279 to 107 on August 3. However, the RMT national executive reported that it was in favour of further talks. All the RMT organised was a token protest over DOO at one station, Waterloo, in London on August 21--the day that First MTR begun to fully operate services. This was after the union reported that the TOC would not make an undertaking to honour existing agreements.

Cash claims the RMT national executive remains committed to a resolution it endorsed at a 2013 Annual General Meeting that condemned the report of Lord McNulty upon which the extension of DOO is based.

The report was commissioned under the previous Labour government in 2009 and adopted by the Conservatives in 2012. This set out for the plan for cutting billions of pounds from the railways and the axing of 20,000 jobs. It specified that DOO would be the norm and the privatisation of the track and signal maintenance system.

The RMT’s resolution denounced this as an attack on all railway workers and called upon the General Secretary to consider co-ordinated strike action. It claims that this is still the case “where practically possible,” while doing everything to prevent such an eventuality through its manoeuvres with the government and private operating companies.

The result is that four years on, the rolling out of

DOO has extended across a third of Britain’s rail network. At Greater Anglia, it accounts for 67 percent and Southern 70 percent.

The main impediment to uniting rail workers in a national offensive against DOO is not the anti-union laws—which are enforced by the union bureaucracy--but the RMT’s claim that deals can be reached on a franchise-by-franchise basis and its acceptance of DOO through stealth.

How far removed the RMT is from its stated opposition to DOO is seen in its promotion of the agreement it reached on the ScotRail franchise in 2016. This involved the RMT and ASLEF accepting a formula whereby the train driver opens the doors while the guard closes them--a staging post for the elimination of the latter.

Far from being a limited victory, as claimed by the RMT, the deal was based on the acceptance of existing work arrangements in which 50 percent of trains run on ScotRail are driver only.

During the dispute, it has been the rank and file who have opposed any retreat over DOO. ASLEF members at Southern GRT twice voted down a union backed sellout deal, while ASLEF train drivers at Merseyrail have consistently refused to cross RMT picket lines.

Rail workers are up against a legacy of privatisation, under which the looting of the public purse by private operators has grown apace, while investment and safety has been undermined and passengers hit with spiralling fare increases.

A successful fight against this requires a struggle against the ASLEF and RMT. What is required is for rail workers to take the dispute into their own hands and overcome the grade and sectional divisions maintained by the unions.



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