Rank-and-file committees needed to take forward UK rail workers' safety fight

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Driver and guard members of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) union held their latest round of strike action over the last few days against Southern GTR, Northern and Merseyrail. They are opposing the extension of driver-only operated (DOO) trains on the three franchises.

At Southern GTR and Northern, walkouts took place on September 1 and September 4. Merseyrail held a three-day stoppage over the same period, including September 3.

The strike, one of the longest running industrial disputes in recent history, was subject to a virtual blackout in the mainstream media. This is despite strike action over DOO threatening to spread to other major franchises on the network--South Western Railway (formerly South West Trains) and Greater Anglia. The RMT is balloting its members for strike action on SWR and the result of a strike ballot at the latter is to be announced later in the month.

The three train operating companies (TOCS) reported different levels of disruption. Southern GTR planned to operate 90 per cent of trains with a reduction and withdrawal of certain services in the capital and south east region. Northern and Merseyrail ran reduced services, which were unable to operate beyond early evening. The RMT reported that the strike was “rock solid”.

The protracted nature of the dispute--which in the case of Southern GRT started in April 2016--testifies to the resolve of rail workers to defend jobs and safety conditions.

But they are being politically disarmed by the RMT and ASLEF in the face of a concerted government and corporate-organised assault. Rather than unify workers across all grades and franchises, the unions work to ensure that strike action has been fragmented, with the RMT citing anti-union laws as justification. Workers are instead diverted into protest actions that are repeatedly suspended in order to conduct fruitless talks with the three companies.

The recent actions only occurred after ASLEF and RMT suspended strike action at Southern GTR to meet with Transport Secretary Chris Grayling. Heralded as the basis for a settlement with the TOCS at round table talks with the government and unions, the position of Southern GTR, Northern and Merseyrail instead has become more entrenched. This in turn has emboldened Greater Anglia and South Western Railway to push ahead with DOO.

Rank-and-file members at Southern GTR have twice voted down ASLEF’s company-backed deal on DOO. ASLEF has reportedly struck another deal with the government and Southern GTR, the contents of which have not been disclosed. RMT general secretary Mick Cash has criticised the deal, mainly on the basis that the RMT was excluded.

This type of manoeuvring and secrecy is the inevitable outcome of a settlement both unions are prepared to accept against drivers and guards. In the case of the RMT this is conducted behind a veil of militant rhetoric but in principle it is no different than ASLEF’s grovelling stance.

Cash and the RMT claimed they had offered a solution to the government to remove the logjam in the dispute with Southern GTR. What this consisted of is unclear. However, the RMT has promoted the deal both unions reached at ScotRail last year.

The agreement reached at ScotRail amounts to a repudiation of any genuine fight against DOO. The RMT ended the strike at ScotRail on the basis of a formula in which responsibility for opening the doors was transferred to the driver. The Scottish franchise is

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already DOO-run on 50 per cent of its network and the union made an undertaking that this would not be challenged.

As the WSWS noted, “The ScotRail deal is an erosion of one of the 35 vital safety roles assigned to the conductor. One is to ensure the train arrives safely in the station and is fully in the platform before opening the doors. This role has prevented many passenger deaths and injuries, and frees up the driver to concentrate on observing signals”.

This type of agreement also serves to confuse the issues and enables the corporate and state media to belittle the issue as one of who gets to open and close train doors.

The implementation of DOO is at the centre of a cost cutting plan--the McNulty report--commissioned under Labour and adopted as Conservative policy in 2012. This envisioned the elimination of 6,000 guards/conductors positions as part of a reduction of jobs on the railways by 20,000.

The government and regulatory authorities will continue to proclaim to the rafters that DOO is a safe method of train despatch, while reducing rail maintenance funding. These lies are recycled in the mainstream media as “modernisation” that will benefit commuters.

Rail workers cannot allow their fight to be sold short. The dangers have been made clear by the recent intervention of guards that were critical in averting a disaster.

Equally, the attempts to scapegoat rail workers for the consequences of the further extension of DOO will only increase. The frame-up of Merseyrail guard Martin Zee for a passenger accident in 2015 at the train/platform interface only collapsed earlier this year after protests by rail workers and the diligence of the jury.

No less than in the case of the terrible fire that destroyed so many lives at Grenfell tower in west London, the government, the state and the media are concealing the dangerous situation that their actions have created for working people.

A genuine fight against DOO can only be carried through by formation of rank-and-file committees to take the dispute out of the hands of ASLEF and the RMT and link it with a broader struggle against austerity and cost-cutting in both the public and private sector.

There exists an undeniable urge to take the fight to the corporations and government. But the subordination of every aspect of life to the profit motive will not be changed through the trade unions and Labour Party.

The Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s pledge for a future Labour government to re-nationalise the railways is based on waiting until 2025 and only concerns five of the rail franchises, and only when their contracts expire. Moreover, it is aimed at keeping workers and youth tied to a party that is facilitating government cuts.

At Merseyrail it is the Labour-controlled Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) which is in the forefront of forcing through driver-only trains in collaboration with TOC Abellio/Serco. The LCRCA, through its public transport body, Merseytravel, awards the contract for the urban rail system. In December last year, Merseytravel announced the purchase of a new fleet of driver-only trains to be operational on the franchise by 2020.

Talks between Liverpool City Region metro Mayor Steve Rotheram, Merseytravel officials and the RMT broke down directly prior to the latest strike after it was made clear there would be no retreat in removing guards. Rotheram was formerly parliamentary private secretary to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and MP for Liverpool Walton. Corbyn welcomed his election as metro Mayor and endorsed Rotheram as “a person of great integrity, who will stand up for the people of Liverpool”.

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