

UK rail workers escalate strikes in the face of scab operation

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Members of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) at five out of eighteen private rail franchises are striking today against the threat to impose Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains.

DOO threatens the loss of approximately 6,000 conductors' jobs. Conductors at Southern, South Western Railways, Greater Anglia, Merseyrail and Arriva Rail North will strike today. South Western Railway employees joined the strike after the new franchise owners, First Group and Hong Kong-based MTR, refused to commit to the retention of conductors. Coordinated strike action was resisted by the RMT for years, but rank-and-file anger forced the union's hand.

The danger to safety posed by DOO trains was underscored ahead of the strike, when a South Western Railways passenger service train derailed on the approach to Wimbledon station, South London. The cooperation between driver and conductor during such incidents is vital. This was also proven in September 2016 by the derailment and a glancing collision at Watford Junction by two London Midland trains, which only narrowly avoided a head on collision. Drivers and conductors of both trains were presented with awards for their conduct during the incident.

Ahead of the strikes, Transport Secretary Chris Grayling wrote to members of parliament declaring the Conservative government's intention to coordinate a national strike-breaking operation. Contingency planning "is well underway and I will write to you with a fuller outline of plans closer to 8 November," he said.

Grayling's statement is the latest indication of a state-backed assault since the first strike vote against DOO at the beginning of 2016 at Southern. At a Tory-organised public meeting in February 2016, senior Department for Transport official Peter Wilkinson declared, "Over the next three years we're going to be having punch

ups and we will see industrial action and I want your support... we have got to break them."

Such threats have not been restricted to Conservative Party officials. In August 2016, John McTernan, a former political adviser to ex-Labour Party Prime Minister Tony Blair, called on the government to "crush the rail unions once and for all" after conductors launched a five-day strike.

The RMT claims that government interference is all that is blocking rail companies from doing a deal, even as the companies are working hand-in-glove with the Tories. Greater Anglia has received the stamp of approval from the "independent" Office of Rail and Road (ORR) for a scabbing operation involving training office staff to operate as conductors during strike days.

The ORR is partly funded by rail companies. Its head is appointed by the Transport Secretary and is "accountable" to parliament. Its support was required after the RMT reported a series of safety breaches during the last strikes on October 3. The most serious incident occurred when a strike breaker opened the passenger doors on the wrong side at Ipswich station, leading to passengers climbing down onto the tracks.

Greater Anglia have refused the RMT's request for full disclosure of strike day safety breaches. The RMT declared that this proved Greater Anglia were "determined to break the strike at any cost..." General Secretary Mick Cash said, "Every single effort that RMT has made to reach negotiated settlements" has been "kicked back in our faces... It is frankly ludicrous that we have been able to negotiate long-term arrangements in Scotland and Wales that protect the guards and passenger safety, but we are being denied the same opportunities with rail companies in England."

Cash stated that “it is the dead hand of the minority Tory Government that is interfering in these disputes to block negotiated settlements.”

The government is acting *on behalf of* the global transport monopolies to increase their profits by smashing strikes and imposing 20,000 job losses. The Rail Delivery Group (RDG) has been tasked with implementing vast job cuts based on the McNulty Report, which was made Conservative government policy in 2012. The RDG is made up of CEOs from all the private rail companies, including the state funded Network Rail, which controls track and infrastructure. One of McNulty’s main recommendations was to make DOO the default position for train operations.

RDG Chief executive Paul Plummer said, “Train operators are doing all they can” to break what he calls “short-term opportunistic strikes by the RMT leadership intent on dragging the country backwards.”

The RMT abandoned the struggle against McNulty’s recommendations years ago, as soon as they gained assurances of a consultancy role with the RDG. The RMT are now trying to create illusions in the RDG as being victim to government intransigence.

The scabbing operation is being assisted by the train drivers’ union, ASLEF, and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). Rank and file drivers have fought to unite with the conductors against DOO. ASLEF’s refusal to act is so blatant that train drivers at Merseyrail took matters into their own hands and refused to cross conductors’ picket lines. At Southern, drivers voted to strike against DOO twice by huge majorities. After Southern took out injunctions to halt strikes, ASLEF held secret talks with the company and put forward two deals to impose DOO. Drivers narrowly voted down both deals. ASLEF are now holding a third ballot to push through a rehash of the original offer, with a result to coincide with today’s RMT strike.

From the outset, the RMT has used the deal signed with Scotrail as a template for the rest of the country. It involves conductors being temporarily retained while handing over to drivers the responsibility to open doors with conductors left only to close them. This is only a step toward the removal of door operation from conductors altogether and the elimination of the post in favour of a much smaller number of on-board revenue collectors.

Cash issued a circular on October 31 reiterating the

RMT’s resistance to a nationally coordinated strike, insisting, “We currently have separate industrial disputes with 5 TOCs [train operating companies] on this issue. These different disputes have their own dynamics, and we are dealing with them all separately.”

Not only is the RMT dividing workers company by company. They are also intensifying the nationalist campaign to divide rail workers from their brothers and sisters internationally, making it impossible to launch a serious struggle against globally organised transport conglomerates backed by the major banks and finance houses.

Cash issued a nationalist rant, complaining of how it was “outrageous that Prime Minister Theresa May and Transport Secretary Chris Grayling are happy to stand aside and cheer on overseas rail companies that rip-off the British passenger” while using profits to “subsidise their domestic transport operations...” Overseas operators were “laughing all the way to the bank,” he continued.

The Socialist Equality Party urges the formation of strike committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracy, as the only way to organise effective national strike action in the face of a scabbing operation coordinated by the state. These committees must seek not only to unite the struggles of rail workers throughout the UK, but to reach out to co-workers in France, Spain and across the European continent. This means rejecting the RMT’s policies of class collaboration mixed with nationalist poison.



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