

Strikes at five UK rail companies

Our reporter
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Railway conductors at Southern, South Western Railways, Greater Anglia, Merseyrail and Arriva Rail North took strike action November 8-9, causing significant disruption throughout England. Members of the Rail Maritime Transport workers union (RMT) are opposing the forced introduction of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains.

Conductors at South Western Railways (SWR), the UK's largest franchise, joined the strikes for the first time.

Outside London Waterloo, the UK's busiest train station, large pickets were mounted as up to half of all services were cancelled. SWR bussed in strike-breakers from other train companies. Strikers reported widespread sympathy from the travelling public, despite the difficulties faced by many getting to work. Public support was also reported by pickets at Southern GTR, where conductors entered their 39th strike day.

In Liverpool, Merseyrail conductors faced a strike-breaking operation. However, reduced services ran between 11:30 and 14:00 and 15:30 to 19:00, with no services at all outside these hours. Merseyrail employees were joined by hundreds of conductors at Arriva Trains depot in Liverpool Lime Street, and by Arriva bus drivers and engineers on strike at the same time over pay. The strikes brought parts of Liverpool and Merseyside to a grinding halt.

Labour Party Mayor Joe Anderson said he gave full support to the bus drivers' strike, but denounced rail strikes. "The RMT demand, which is for everything to stay as it is, is unreasonable," he declared. "I don't believe that coming from Wirral at 8am in the morning to Liverpool, when the train is packed with people, needs a guard on it. There are occasions when it simply isn't needed."

Strikes at Arriva trains Northern, covering all the major cities in the north of England, including Liverpool, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester,

Huddersfield, Bradford, Sheffield, Hull and many smaller towns, caused widespread disruption with half of services cancelled or replaced by buses. The strikes were solidly supported in the face of a concerted strike-breaking operation.

On Greater Anglia, company trained strike-breakers were said to have manned a full service. The company boasted it could do this because 60 percent of services are already DOO.

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said, "The only way that Greater Anglia can be running these services is through taking serious risks with public safety just as they did during the last phase of strike action. Rail companies are training up rail staff who have previously had no rail operational experience to stand in as highly trained guards. In some cases, staff are being bussed in by other train companies not involved in the dispute, paid a bounty and put up overnight in hotels."

But it is the actions of the rail unions, which are working to enforce acceptance of DOO, that poses the threat to the livelihoods and safety of conductors, rail drivers and the travelling public. On November 8, as the first day of strikes by conductors began, train drivers' union ASLEF announced that Southern GTR drivers had voted for a union-brokered deal accepting DOO in return for a pay rise.

The agreement is said to include a five-year pay increase worth 28.5 percent and a meaningless pledge by Southern that it must aim to have a second safety-trained person (i.e., not a conductor) on every DOO train, except, according to ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan, in "exceptional circumstances."

Strikers at London Waterloo described the ASLEF agreement as "a sell-out," saying "the government will be celebrating today." Another striker said the deal was "a gift to the train operating companies" and that "ASLEF must think we are stupid."

The deal was the culmination of efforts by ASLEF officials over the past two years to oppose determined efforts by Southern GTR drivers to oppose any expansion of DOO throughout the network. ASLEF abandoned two massive strike votes after court intervention and used the threat of financial penalties to wear down opposition. When this failed, the TUC was brought in to pressure drivers to accept a deal cooked up behind their backs. Only on their third attempt did ASLEF secure a vote by Southern GTR drivers to push through DOO on all its services.

Cash, after a perfunctory description of the ASLEF deal as “shabby,” reiterated his desire to shut down the strikes and impose an agreement reached earlier by the RMT with Scotrail—where drivers open doors and conductors close them. This is a major step on the road to eliminating the conductor’s role and implementing DOO via the back door.

The RMT leader urged Prime Minister Theresa May and Transport Secretary Chris Grayling to “call off the centrally imposed blockade on serious talks in all of the current rail disputes and allow us to get on with genuine negotiations with their contractors. ... If the government allows normal industrial relations to recommence it would free the union up to negotiate deals like the ones we have successfully struck in Wales and Scotland that? guarantee a guard on the trains.”

Grayling has declared that the strikes have no legitimacy and are an attempt by Cash to bring down the Conservatives. Cash replied, “The only person politicising this rail safety issue is Chris Grayling himself.”

Cash reiterated his nationalist stance on the dispute as being against a Tory government “prepared to sit back and cheer on overseas operators who are robbing Londoners blind to subsidise transport services in Paris, Amsterdam and Hong Kong?”

The RMT’s role in promoting nationalist divisions between British, German and Chinese rail workers is mirrored in their refusal to wage any unified struggle against DOO by both drivers and conductors.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to a SWR conductor who explained, “The strike for us is because SWR have taken over the franchise. It became obvious very quickly that they were going to change the title of the guards [conductors]. It was going to be a ‘second

person’ rather than a guard. They were going to change the training so instead of being safety-critical trained you are going to be ‘safety trained’—which does not give you the same capabilities on things like evacuation, which will eventually lead to downgrading of pay and downgrading of our role.

“What we believe is they are trying to set up a precedent to run more and more trains without a guard. They are also bringing in a large fleet of bombardier trains, which are set up as DOO. We think the reason for this is they are going to stop using guards on the metro routes.”

Referring to a train derailment on SWR at Wimbledon just ahead of the strike, he explained, “I had a colleague on that train. A guard went straight back to reassure passengers who were really scared, thinking the train was going to tip over. They evacuated the rear coach straight away. The guard was straight down there and acted, whereas it could have taken the driver on his own a lot longer. With it derailing, there could have been an electric current going places it shouldn’t and sparking a fire. In those circumstances the guard would have prevented deaths occurring.

“We need to back each other up and it should go national. They are trying to drive down pay and conditions in a race to the bottom. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening all the time. This is all about profit. None of the savings they make by cutting jobs will be passed on to the passengers.

“ASLEF’s deal is shocking. The ruling classes rule by divide and conquer. Members of the RMT at Southern GTR must be looking at this and thinking, ‘What is going on? We are all working class people. Why are we being set against each other?’”



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