

Betrayal of UK rail workers' fight against driver only operations reveals treacherous role of unions

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Following the sell-out deal signed between the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and Southern Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) earlier this month, the private rail companies are escalating their offensive against rail workers.

The deal allows for a significant expansion of Driver Only Operation (DOO) train services on Southern, the largest private rail franchise servicing southern England from its terminuses at London Victoria and London Bridge. It lays the basis for the eventual elimination of conductors from Southern trains.

ASLEF leader Mick Whelan said the deal was not a “template” for the rest of the industry, but this is exactly what it is.

Its immediate impact has seen an escalation of the assault on rail workers across the country. Virgin Trains West Coast has threatened to impose a pay deal that members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union had previously rejected. Virgin workers voted nine to one to strike.

A consortium led by Abellio, which also runs Scotrail and Greater Anglia, has just taken over the London Midland franchise and declared it will make major changes to working conditions. It has also refused to commit to retaining the conductor on trains. Arriva Cross Country have severed all talks with rail unions on new rostering demands and deployed a scab army of managers to work trains.

On November 8 in its third attempt ASLEF delivered a blow against striking conductors, securing a ‘yes’ vote in a ballot for their deal with Southern. After having modified forms of the sell-out rejected twice previously, ASLEF made clear there would be no return to strikes and that it would ensure drivers kept voting until they got the deal the union executives wanted.

In return for a 28 percent pay rise spread over five years, ASLEF agreed to set up a Joint Working Party to enforce DOO. This agreed to the transformation of conductors into “On Board Supervisors (OBS)” with minimal safety training.

The agreement states, “the driver is responsible for the control, movement and dispatch of the train”, adding that GTR recognises it is an “increased responsibility and workload” for the driver.

To add insult to injury, ASLEF officials announced the result on the same day as conductors went on strike at five different rail companies, including Southern, opposing the forced introduction of DOO trains.

This result came after almost two years of struggle by drivers at Southern to resist DOO expansion.

The company made clear that OBSs will be deskilled once door control procedures are removed from them. It has already hired new OBSs with no training in levels of train protection associated with the conductors’ role. The list of occasions when a train can leave without an OBS on board is wide ranging.

They can leave if an OBS is absent at the start of duty, late running, on emergency leave, on short notice sickness, absent, displaced during disruption, if there is an error in misreading a job card, if a driver leaves without an OBS, if an OBS leaves the train to assist a customer, or in case of sickness while at work.

So far ASLEF have not said what happens if an OBS is absent from duty due to industrial action. If it does not include this, it has made mass scabbing operations much easier by lowering the qualification for training strikebreakers.

The deal comes at a heavy price for drivers and job security. Combined with a massive increase in productivity by taking over door operation

procedures—which are extensive—the deal allows management to overturn long-established working conditions, enforce Sunday working, increased flexibility of start and finish times and it removes the right for time off for hospital appointments.

With the betrayal, ASLEF have moved nearer to securing a key objective of the Conservative government—which welcomed the deal—of the removal of conductors' control over the safety operation of the train.

The government adopted Lord McNulty's report in 2012, demanding austerity on the UK's railways. One of McNulty's main demands was for the removal of conductors from train operation and the imposition of DOO across the network. This was part of cutting 20,000 jobs, an end to expectations of yearly pay rises linked to inflation and exhausting productivity increases.

In November 2015, ASLEF, along with other rail unions, committed to oppose DOO in all its forms and reverse it where it currently exists.

After a serious incident on a DOO train where a passenger was trapped in the doors and dragged along the platform, ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan said earlier this year, "Southern says DOO is safe. It isn't... This picture [the incident above] shows it isn't... And that is why we need a guard on every train, to check the doors, and passengers are safe, before the train leaves the station."

For their capitulation, ASLEF, Whelan and his well-heeled cronies are despised by many rail workers. Whelan's treachery should not blind workers to the equally pernicious role of the RMT since the struggle against DOO began.

ASLEF officials sought to justify their sell-out by pointing out that it was a better deal than last winter when the RMT—representing conductors at Southern GTR—advised them to accept the OBS role ahead of a deadline set by the company of December 31 for mass sackings if they refused. Around 50 percent of conductors still disregarded the RMT's advice.

RMT leader Mick Cash's muted criticism of ASLEF's sell-out was in sharp contrast to that when ASLEF and the Trades Union Congress tried to push through a similar deal at Southern. Then he called it a "historical betrayal" of the 2015 joint pledge to resist DOO.

ASLEF's attempt to justify today's swinishness with yesterday's will not wash. The sell-out by the union bureaucracy of the bitter struggle of rail workers at Southern—with conductors holding 39 days of strikes and drivers many days—demonstrates there is no line they will

not cross.

The sell-out—and the divisive role of the RMT—confirms that the unions are the main obstacles in preventing a unified struggle by workers against the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions.

The transport corporations are working on a plan to remove conductors and drivers and automate the entire rail network. They are using the London Docklands Light Railway as their model. It has no driver or conductor but a super-exploited "train captain" who operates doors and driving controls if the automated system fails, amongst an array of other duties.

ASLEF officials are fully aware of advanced preparations throughout Europe for an all-out assault on the driving post and the introduction of driverless technology within the next five years.

This is being spearheaded by the state-controlled Deutsche Bahn (DB), which has significant investments in private rail franchises throughout the UK. DB sped up their plans as a result of the widespread industrial action over the last years that brought large areas of Germany to a standstill.

On picket lines, union officials and their pseudo-left defenders in the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party have attacked the *World Socialist Web Site* for exposing their reactionary role. They claimed the WSWS was undermining what they described as a united front against the employers and the government.

Whatever denunciations these forces have made of the ASLEF sellout is from the standpoint of boosting the so called "left" credentials of the RMT and create illusions that they remain a fighting organisation of the working class. This is in order to obscure the truth that long ago the RMT—as with all the unions—were transformed into well paid corporate arms of management.

The only way forward in the struggle against DOO is to break with the RMT and ASLEF bureaucracy—the most divisive force in the struggle against DOO. What is required is the creation of new genuinely independent organisations of struggle, based on an international socialist programme to unite all rail, tube and bus workers against attacks on jobs wages and working conditions.



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