

UK: South Western Railway conductors to strike over Driver Only Operation

Tom Holling
26 July 2018

Train guards at South Western Railway (SWR) begin a series of 24-hour walkouts today to protest government-backed plans by the private rail franchise to introduce Driver Only Operation (DOO) services.

SWR is Britain's busiest commuter train network and transports more than 4 million passengers a week in and out of London Waterloo. The company is currently run as a joint venture between First Group and MTR, the owner of the Hong Kong Metro. First Group also runs the neighbouring Great Western Railway (GWR) as well as Hull Trains and Trans Pennine Express. Combined with all of its franchises, First Group operates more than 400 stations and carried some 260 million passengers in 2016/2017.

At the heart of DOO are Tory government and private train operators' plans to engage in massive cost-cutting. Threatened is the elimination of 6,000 guards' jobs, imperilling public safety.

Currently, guards are responsible for 30 different safety functions. Under DOO, safety critical responsibilities will be taken away to be replaced with revenue collection and customer service duties, with the driver alone taking over the full control of the train.

Over the past two years, the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers' union (RMT) and drivers' union ASLEF have systematically sabotaged every struggle mounted by rail workers at franchises across the UK. They have refused to mobilise a united offensive of all rail workers—guards and drivers—in a joint offensive against the companies and government.

The latest action at SWR is a case in point. Strike action will not run over eight consecutive days but will be staggered throughout July and August. The first day of action is scheduled for today, with a final 48-hour strike beginning August 31.

To limit the impact, the RMT is not calling its SWR

members out on the busiest days of the week, with most of the strike days falling at weekends. Despite the increased responsibilities train drivers will face under DOO, the RMT has made no call for drivers to walk out in support of guards.

The last time the RMT permitted its members at SWR to strike over the issue of DOO was nine months ago, in November 2017. In the meantime, the RMT halted a planned five-day strike over DOO by SWR members in May and a scheduled three-day strike in June.

Everything has been done by the RMT to fragment workers on a company-by-company basis, negotiating secret deals behind the backs of its wider membership.

In the last 10 days alone, the RMT has called off disputes over DOO at two franchises, Arriva Rail North (ARN) and Greater Anglia.

At ARN, workers were set to strike on July 21 for 24 hours, but the union issued a statement on July 16 cancelling the action.

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said, "RMT's negotiating team has been in talks with Arriva Rail North over the past week in an attempt to seek a resolution to the long-running dispute. ..." He added that the company has "set out a process for reconvening talks" around proposals to set up a joint working party to consider a "range of options on the deployment of on-board staff, including a specific option of retaining a second safety critical person on board all ARN trains."

ARN Director Richard Allan responded, without any commitment to specifically retaining a guard on trains, "We want to work with RMT to design and shape the future on-board role for colleagues to help deliver better customer service."

Three days later, the struggle at Greater Anglia was called off, following the RMT's suspension of strikes

at the company in June to consider an “improved offer” over DOO from management. Workers staged 12 strikes at the firm over the past year.

The RMT said that its members at Greater Anglia had accepted the deal it recommended by a margin of nine to one. No information on the contents of the deal has been made public.

Cash said, “If we can reach a negotiated settlement on Greater Anglia that has safety, security and access its core then there is no reason why we can’t achieve the same on SWR if the company are prepared to get down to business.”

Hailing the Greater Anglia agreement and others in Scotland and Wales, he added, “We now need to roll that principle out to the train companies where we remain in dispute and deliver the kind of safe, secure and accessible railway for all that the travelling public rightly demand.”

What these deals actually represent is a move towards DOO with the guard losing full control of the doors.

The agreement reached at ScotRail amounts to a repudiation of any genuine fight against DOO. The strike there was ended on the basis of a formula in which responsibility for opening the doors was transferred to the driver. The Scottish franchise is already DOO-run on 50 percent of its network, and the union made an undertaking that this would not be challenged.

This sabotage by the rail unions has enabled the franchises to go on the offensive against rail workers.

At Great Western Rail, the company has secured the use of DOO-equipped Class 165 and 166 turbo trains from areas covering Reading and London. A new agreement surrounding this move introduces a bridge towards the full rollout of DOO, with the conductor losing an important aspect of his safety-critical role. The deal reached by GWR and the RMT, in order to secure use of these trains, was that the driver takes control of the door operation and opening the doors, with the conductor having control only over closing the doors.

The unions are stepping up their sabotaging of strikes and collaboration with the companies under conditions of growing opposition by transport workers to the attacks on their pay and conditions by the corporations.

RMT members at Eurostar’s terminal at St. Pancras are to strike for 24 hours on July 28 to protest what are

described as “dangerous working conditions.” The terminal links London with Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam. London Underground maintenance workers, also members of the RMT, are set to hold two 12-hour walkouts over the weekend of August 3-4 at their Ruislip depot in a dispute over pay. Stagecoach Supertram workers in Sheffield recently held several strikes to demand better pay, and Manchester MetroLink workers are also balloting for industrial action over the same issue.

The fight to defend safety and jobs on the railways must be taken out of the hands of the unions and be conducted democratically by the workforce. What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees that link together the struggle of workers against DOO with that of all transport workers opposing the offensive against their terms and conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact