

UK: No to Driver Only Trains in any form, mobilise against rail union sellout

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The Rail, Maritime Transport (RMT) and ASLEF trade unions are escalating their efforts to sell out rail workers fighting the imposition of Driver Only Operated trains (DOO).

The fight against DOO is in grave danger due to the unions' opposition to mobilising their tens of thousands of members in an all out fight against the orchestrated Tory government/transport conglomerates assault on rail workers. This operation has continued over the last two years, involving well financed scabbing operations, the courts, threats of violence against strikers by ministers and the rolling out of new anti-strike laws—all backed by the corporate media.

Rail workers' desire to fight DOO is seen in the support for the series of ongoing strikes. Guards at South Western Railway began a 48-hour strike at midnight Thursday against DOO, with a further stoppage set for October 15, while guards on Arriva Northern are striking today over the issue, with more strikes on October 13 and 20.

The latest sellout is being pushed through at Merseyrail, which carries 110,000 passengers per weekday and employs 1,200 staff. It runs services across the Liverpool City region and into Cheshire, Chester and West Lancashire.

RMT general secretary Mick Cash recently called off strikes by Merseyrail conductors for “months,” based on a deal to impose a form of DOO.

The RMT, Merseyrail and the Labour Party led Liverpool City Region Combined Authority agreed “in principle” in a joint statement that the “design of the new trains proposes that the door control and dispatch of the trains will transfer to the driver.”

Transport giants Serco and Abellio between them own 100 percent of shares in the Merseyrail franchise. Serco is a private outsourcing operation based in the UK and Abellio is a private arm of the Dutch state railways, Nederlandse Spoorwegen.

Merseyrail conductors have been in dispute for 18 months, taking 16 days of strike action. They were supported by train drivers from the ASLEF union who refused to cross picket lines. This powerful act of solidarity in the face of legal threats, which threatened to become a rallying point across the rail network, has been systematically undermined at every stage by the unions.

Cash hailed the Merseyrail deal as “significant” because a

“second” so-called “safety critical” person on the train will be retained. The statement agreed only to examine ways to “pay for a second member of staff on each train” but only if “additional funding” is generated. All parties would over the next months “develop a full proposed agreement.”

The safety critical aspects of a new role are all up for grabs as an “element of this will be agreeing the role and safety responsibilities of this second member of staff as part of the process. The current business case will need to be revisited. Whilst this takes place and until dialogue has been completed there will be no further industrial action.”

Merseyrail Managing Director, Andy Heath, committed only to “explore” the “affordability” of retaining a second person on board the new trains.

The proposed sellout came after the RMT pushed through a deal in July at Greater Anglia, covering the region of Eastern England. After a series of strikes by workers confronting a massive strikebreaking operation, the RMT secured a vote to transfer door procedures from conductors to drivers.

The Tories with the support of the unions are responsible for the largest expansion of DOO services in more than 30 years. In December 2017, the RMT published figures showing that under the current plans at that time, a million more trains per year would run across the UK without a conductor.

* The RMT assisted the removal of 130 conductors from London Overground services in 2013-14. They overturned a strike mandate, forcing conductors to take redundancy or migrate into London Overground ticket office jobs.

*In 2016, the RMT described as a “victory” the imposition of a form of DOO on ScotRail conductors, where drivers now open doors and conductors close them. Prior to this, 50 percent of ScotRail services were already DOO.

*The majority of Southern GTR conductors are now On-Board Supervisors stripped of door operations. After first rejecting company threats to accept the new role or lose their jobs in 2017, the RMT told members to accept the new role. Before the strikes initiated in early 2016, GTR services were already 50 percent DOO.

*There are advanced preparations for DOO at Great Western Railways and West Midlands Trains (WMT), where the RMT has blocked calls by workers to organise industrial action.

Behind the assault on the conductors is the massive cuts package initiated by Lord McNulty's recommendations in 2011. Commissioned by the last Labour government, the McNulty report became Tory government policy, with many of his proposals enforced with the collaboration of the unions.

McNulty recommended cutting 20,000 jobs, pay cuts, productivity drives and insisted "the default position for all services on the GB Rail network should be DOO (driver-only operation), with a second member of train-crew only being provided where there is a commercial, technical or other imperative."

With workers standing firm to fight these plans, the rail unions initiated a joint campaign in 2015, claiming they opposed DOO in all forms and would restore conductors to trains where they had previously been removed. However, they limited actions to isolated one-day and two-day strikes to minimize the impact while allowing workers to dissipate their anger.

The Socialist Equality Party warned from the outset that the unions' pledge was a smokescreen behind which they would collaborate with the government to impose DOO. Everything that has happened since, now underlined by the Merseyrail agreement, confirms that without the connivance of the rail unions the McNulty report would have been stopped in its tracks.

Crucially, the deal was welcomed by the Labour Party Metro Mayor for the Liverpool City Region, Steve Rotheram. Rotheram's predecessor and now Labour Liverpool Mayor, Joe Anderson, is notorious for attacking Merseyrail strikes and ridiculing the conductors' role in the face of a mountain of evidence proving their vital safety contribution to safety.

Whilst presenting a more "left" face, Rotheram warned no rail workers' job was safe, saying, "I also want to be clear that it requires a significant financial commitment and hard choices on all sides."

Even more attacks on rail workers jobs are planned. According to the RMT, ASLEF are collaborating with GTR to upgrade the new technology to introduce full DOO dispatch that eliminates train dispatchers' jobs on the platforms.

Arriva Rail London and Transport for London (TFL) have just announced the planned closure of 51 of 100 London Overground ticket offices. When DOO was imposed on London Overground, the RMT confronted conductors with the choice of redundancy or migrating into tickets offices, which 40 conductors did. They now again face losing their jobs.

The RMT have demanded right-wing Labour Party London Mayor Sadiq Khan step in to halt the closures. During his mayoral election campaign Khan promised to reconsider the closure of 265 London Underground (LUL) ticket offices carried out by his Tory predecessor Boris Johnson. As soon as he took office, the pledge was dropped and the ticket offices remained closed.

Over the last two years, conductors and drivers have fought

for a unified struggle in the face of an onslaught by the Conservative government and right-wing Labour Party figures demanding the crushing of the strikes. Workers must confront the fact that they face equally determined opponents in the RMT and ASLEF bureaucracy, who are actively supporting and collaborating in imposing DOO in various forms.

Without a break with the pro-capitalist unions, the struggle against DOO is heading for defeat.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the grip of the union bureaucracy. Such committees must draw up demands for powerful unified strikes of drivers and conductors and all rail workers across the UK and Europe to oppose the state backed transport conglomerates:

- * Oppose DOO in any form.

- * Revoke the McNulty attacks on workers' jobs.

- * Billions for rail transport, affordable fares, pensions, jobs and wage increases.

- * Workers control over safety, end the dictatorship of private corporate profiteers!

- * For joint action by rail workers across the UK and Europe facing the same brutal attacks.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the private rail companies to be expropriated, without compensation to franchise owners, and controlled democratically by transport workers and the travelling public. It is the only way to create a safe, affordable, comprehensive and democratically controlled modern transportation system free from the transport conglomerates.



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