# Socialist Equality Party opposes RMT rail union sellout at Liverpool meeting

**Our reporters**
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The Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) held a meeting in Liverpool, November 29, as part of a series ostensibly intended to galvanise public support for the struggle against the introduction of Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains. Instead, the meeting confirmed that the RMT is opposed to any struggle to unite its members against DOO.

For over two years, RMT and the drivers' union ASLEF have sabotaged the fight by thousands of guards in defence of their jobs and the safety of railway users. The UK's private rail franchises are set on introducing DOO, in which the safety-critical job of guards is to be downgraded before their role is eliminated entirely. Around 6,000 guards are threatened, as part of government-backed plans—stemming back to 2011—to eliminate more than 20,000 rail worker jobs.

In recent weeks, staff at South West trains and Northern Rail have continued to strike against plans to introduce DOO. Earlier in the dispute, rail workers have also struck at Southern Rail, Merseyrail and Greater Anglia.

Prior to the meeting, Socialist Equality Party members distributed a WSWS article, "No to driver only operated services at West Midland Trains! For a national mobilisation of rail workers," to around 120 rail workers and members of the public. It provided details of the RMT's latest attempt to impose DOO at West Midlands Trains (WMT), noting, "In June, behind workers' backs, the RMT entered back room discussions on a Framework Agreement that states, 'On such new or modified rolling stock, train drivers will operate the train doors and undertake train despatch in normal circumstances.'"

The WSWS article explained, "Workers at WMT are being forced to accept an agreement that has not been discussed with them, with the RMT denying them the most elementary right to strike to protect their jobs."

The article called for a rebellion by rail workers against the deal, as either "the unions will retain control and impose sellout deals over DOO everywhere—followed by a massive assault on all wages and working conditions across the entire rail network—or workers will take the struggle into their own hands and open up an avenue of mass struggle."

The main speaker in Liverpool was RMT Assistant General Secretary Steve Hedley, a former member and close supporter of the pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP). Also speaking were Liverpool City Region Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram—formerly parliamentary private secretary to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn—and Dan Carden MP, who also supports Corbyn.

The speakers all proclaimed that the RMT is waging a determined fight, loyally echoed from the floor by members of the Socialist Party—one of whom congratulated the RMT and described the disputes on Merseyrail and Northern as "a model of tenacity, determination and solidarity."

Nothing was said about the fact that Rotheram has played a pivotal role in enforcing DOO through a sellout deal "in principle" with Merseyrail and the Labour-led Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. Under this agreement, "door control and dispatch of the trains will transfer to the driver" from the guard on new trains to be brought into operation by 2020.

In his opening remarks, Hedley directed his fire against the exposure of the RMT's role by the SEP, who he said, "are trying to say that we are some sort of sellouts and class traitors, but all our decisions are taken by reps, every one of them … and the membership."

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During the Q&A session, a member of the SEP said that the RMT was holding a meeting to build support for conductors fighting DOO at Northern Rail even as it was working to contain their dispute. To applause, she asked Hedley, “Why has the RMT accepted DOO at ScotRail and Greater Anglia? Why has the RMT entered a Framework Agreement at West Midlands to impose DOO?”

The RMT has “isolated conductors in the north and elsewhere who are fighting bitterly against DOO.”

In response, Hedley claimed, “We’ve never agreed a deal for DOO … We’ve recently ensured there’s going to be a safety critical person, a guard on every train, on Greater Anglia … that still have guards on trains. At [West] Midlands there’s no agreement, just a framework for negotiations, just like everywhere else.”

His comments involve sleight of hand, as the union’s Greater Anglia deal and framework agreements, as stated in the SEP leaflet, are forms of DOO, including Driver Controlled Operation (DCO). The RMT agreed, “*Train drivers will operate the train doors and undertake train dispatch in normal circumstances* subject to undertaking a safety risk assessment of train dispatch for those locations affected on a station by station basis.” [Emphasis added]

Holding up the SEP leaflet, Hedley said, “I don’t see you out there picketing people and trade unions who are not on strike … In the middle of the dispute you are saying the RMT are sellouts. That’s an absolutely incredible position … Our members decide the tactics of a dispute not some self-appointed elite … who think they know what’s best for the working class.”

Another member of the SEP denounced Hedley’s attacks, insisting that the party had opposed DOO “right from the outset … We’ve been to picket lines, we’ve published every single action on our website … But what has taken place? A day strike here, a day there.”

To applause she asked, “Why doesn’t the RMT call for total, national action against DOO?”

Hedley answered by blaming rail workers. “It’s the easiest thing in the world to say… what we need is a general strike,” he said. “People have been saying that for 20 years. It’s not materialised has it? If we want a general strike, let’s organize it, let’s do it, let’s have a socialist society. But at the minute what our members are telling us is we are not at that point yet.”

Hedley’s claim that the RMT is straining at the leash to fight DOO, but is held back by its members, was refuted by events that same day. The RMT released a press statement declaring that it was prepared “to suspend Northern Rail action this weekend for talks if company meets key guarantees on second person on the company’s trains.”

The RMT sought only “clarity” from the company on “a new proposal that will see the retention of a second person on-board trains.” The proposal specified that this “second member of staff,” i.e., not specifically a guard, “will retain the full suite of safety and operational competencies of the guard, including a direct role at the platform/train interface and train despatch.” It says nothing about a guard being in full control of the doors, which is the main issue of dispute.

Northern Rail did not accept the RMT’s offer, but the union insisted, “We are available across the weekend and would welcome talks commencing as soon as possible…”

This search for an agreement with management that safeguard’s the RMT bureaucracy’s perks and privileges at the expense of members’ jobs, wages and working conditions is the real reason why there has been no unified action called.

The Liverpool meeting confirmed that workers require new rank-and file organisations of struggle and must act independently of the union bureaucracy. This defiance must be broadened out with rail workers forming rank-and-file committees to unite transport workers throughout the UK. These should also reach out to their fellow workers facing similar attacks from the global transport conglomerates across the European continent. The SEP is the political leadership needed to wage such an offensive.

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