

UK rail union calls off strikes against driver-only-operated trains

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Leading up to the third anniversary of the struggle by rail conductors and drivers against driver-only-operated trains (DOO), the Rail, Maritime Transport Workers union (RMT) called off all industrial action by its members.

On April 26, 2016, RMT members at the Southern GTR section of the Govia private franchise covering Thameslink, Gatwick Express and Southern Trains services, forced the hand of the union by demanding a fight to defend 6,000 UK conductors' jobs.

The Conservative government is behind the plot to impose huge cost-cutting and de-staffing operation on the railways.

In the intervening period the RMT and drivers' union ASLEF have isolated workers at the various private rail franchises, opposing any united offensive by guards and drivers.

The RMT has now called off all strike action, based on the claim by General Secretary Mick Cash that it is in negotiations to secure agreement for a "second safety critical person" to be retained on trains. This lie is already exposed.

RMT officials acknowledge that Thameslink, which has taken over the main routes on the Southern Trains franchise, is refusing to recognise On Board Supervisors (OBS)—former Southern GTR conductors—as an operational or "Traffic Grade" and refusing to recognise RMT as bargaining agent. The OBS's have been stripped of door operations and most of the conductor's former safety functions.

Cash pleaded with Thameslink management that the RMT was essential in maintaining "good industrial relations" and preventing struggles "escalating" out of control.

Conductors who took the RMT's advice to accept the OBS role in December 2016 now face the consequences, including the possible loss of their jobs.

Southern GTR conductors were made to fight alone by the RMT in the face of a major strike-breaking operation when managers and supervisors—many who are members of the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA)—were trained as strike-breakers.

When the conductors' strikes began, rail and transport strikes were breaking out across Europe. Conductors also had the backing of most Southern GTR drivers, opposed to operating the 50 percent of DOO trains already in place. The railway unions opposed European-wide action and a struggle against the Tory government, with the RMT calling token action on a company-by company basis while agitating against foreign-owned UK rail franchises.

The first major effort by railway workers to end the isolation of their strikes was by drivers on Gatwick Express. Days before conductors' strikes began in early April 2016, Gatwick Express drivers refused to operate 12 new carriage trains and insisted on the presence of a fully trained conductor. ASLEF had agreed to run up to 10 carriage trains as DOO. The owner Govia secured a high court injunction and blocked drivers' action. ASLEF accepted the ruling.

Soon after at ScotRail's Abellios franchise conductors voted for strike action to resist the spread of DOO services across Scotland. After a series of joint strikes, the ScotRail strikes were called off on August 3 ahead of a five-day strike on Southern GTR. In October a deal was pushed through allowing drivers to release doors and leaving conductors only to close doors.

In August 2016 the RMT called a five-day strike, the longest since 1968, due to widespread anger at a Southern GTR ultimatum that conductors accept the new role of OBS or face dismissal. Many conductors resisted, but others accepted the new role based on advice issued by Cash. The Southern GTR strike was called off after three days.

At the same time, the RMT were balloting 1,000 GTR station staff across the Govia franchise against ticket office closures and partial openings and the creation of “station hosts,” threatening 130 jobs. In September 2016, the RMT called off the station staff strikes and agreed a trial run of the station closures at eight locations.

ASLEF called off a ballot of Southern GTR drivers in August 2016, the day before the result was to be announced, citing legal threats by the company. In November 2016 drivers at Southern GTR secured an unprecedented mandate for strikes. After a series of strikes by drivers and conductors, bringing huge areas of southeastern England, including London, to a standstill, Govia again turned to the courts and ASLEF capitulated.

In early 2017 conductors at Merseyrail and Arriva Trains Northern voted to strike against DOO. In September 2017 Abellio’s franchise Greater Anglia conductor and driver members also voted to strike. At its height, five rail franchises were involved in strikes that brought large parts of the rail network to a halt.

At the beginning of 2017, in the face of strike action by rail, London Underground and air traffic controllers, ASLEF called off more strikes. It prepared a sell-out deal to impose DOO on the majority of Southern GTR services. Drivers voted down the first deal. ASLEF called in the Trades Union Congress to sponsor a second deal—with minor alterations—and drivers again voted it down. Management and ASLEF were forced to include a significant pay increase to push through a third deal.

Cash called ASLEF’s actions an “historical betrayal,” but this description applies to his own union’s recommendation on October 11, 2016, ahead of ASLEF, that conductors “should ‘volunteer’ under protest” for the new OBS role.

Thameslink will not stop at DOO. Plans are well advanced at Thameslink for the introduction of driverless ATO (automatic train operation) services. With the union’s cooperation a four-mile stretch of mainline track through the heart of London is now testing ATO, which will then spread rapidly throughout the network.

The last two years of conductors’ strikes have been characterised by sustained efforts by the rank-and-file to coordinate united action. The RMT countered this, with critical struggles wound down at Abellio’s Greater Anglia franchise, Arriva Trains Northern, and West Midlands Trains and South Western Railway.

In July 2018 Greater Anglia conductors and drivers were forced to accept the RMT’s recommendation for effectively removing conductors’ control over train door

operation. Within weeks the RMT called off strikes at Abellio’s Merseyrail franchise. Months of negotiations concluded with an April 12, 2019 announcement that conductors would become Customer Service Officers (CSOs) stripped of doors and the majority of their safety role. While praising their negotiating team, the RMT have not yet formally agreed CSO.

Strike action by conductors and drivers on South West Railways has been called off after the RMT agreed to enter negotiations over the conductors’ “safety critical competencies.”

In February 2019 strike action was called off at the last franchise, Arriva Trains Northern, with a similar “breakthrough” in negotiations cited. RMT responded to demands to know the content of negotiations informed members on April 16 that they are proceeding “to our satisfaction.”

At West Midlands Trains, the RMT has rejected all calls for strikes against DOO. Months of resistance from RMT members to the implications of a “second safety-critical” person culminated in a mass meeting where the RMT company council reps doing the negotiations resigned and the union was forced to come out against removing conductors’ train operational role. The union then sought to intimidate workers by warning them of the consequences of protracted long-drawn-out strikes.

The rail unions function as arms of management in disciplining the workforce. The essential lesson to be drawn is that the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions cannot confront European and international transport corporations. Rail workers in Britain must unite with their co-workers in Europe and internationally, employed in the same global corporations and facing the same attacks. This fightback must be organised by establishing rank-and-file committees at rail depots, independent of the trade unions, as part of the fight to develop a political counteroffensive of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist programme.



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