

# UK: South West Rail workers begin month-long strike to defend jobs and conditions.

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Train guards at South West Rail (SWR) began a 27-day strike Monday, opposing company efforts to impose Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains. DOO is part of decade-long plans to remove thousands of train guards, gravely jeopardising public safety.

The walkout involves nearly 900 guards and 40 drivers who are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union. The main drivers' union, ASLEF, has not called its members out on strike at SWR.

Guards set up picket lines at stations throughout SWR's network, including at London's main Waterloo station.

The strike is the longest called by the RMT in a bitter four-year fight by rail workers to stop DOO and is the longest rail strike in British history. It will continue throughout December, except Christmas Day and Boxing Day, national holidays when train services traditionally do not run. The strike will also be suspended on 12 December, the day of the general election. The strike is set to cause massive disruption as SWR operates the second biggest rail commuter network in the UK. It serves around 600,000 passengers daily out of London Waterloo to the southwest, including Bristol, Reading, Weymouth, Woking, Portsmouth and Bournemouth.

Despite SWR's boast that it would roll out a pre-planned strikebreaking operation and would "be calling on our team of contingency guards" the company is not expected to run more than half its scheduled Monday-to-Friday services.

The impact was immediately felt. At London's Earlsfield station southwest of the capital, crowds of passengers wanting to catch trains snaked out of the station and around the corner, with local bus services unable to cope with overflow.

Guards at West Midlands Trains (WMT) who serve a wide area of the country and vital services into London, are already striking, including each Saturday in December. Drivers in the ASLEF union have refused in large numbers to cross pickets of WMT guards, showing the desire for unity of all rail workers, which the unions have for years suppressed.

The SWR strike began as lecturers and other university staff finish an eight-day strike this week at 60 higher education institutions in defence of pay, conditions and pensions. A further 110,000 postal workers were set to strike during December. This was prevented by the High Court which last

week upheld a company injunction to have the strike ballot ruled illegal.

Growing strike action and militant sentiment is part of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally. Rail workers in France are set to protest alongside other workers in a general strike by public sector workers on December 5 in defence of pension rights. The London *Times*, owned by oligarch Rupert Murdoch, described the December 5 strikes as opening up struggles that threaten to "engulf France in winter of discontent." This follows major strikes last year by French rail workers against privatisation, and wildcat action this year to protest the erosion of basic safety standards.

The refusal of the SWR to retreat from its plans in the face of a month long strike can only be understood in the context of the ruling elite's determination to enforce a massive assault on the historically won gains of the working class under conditions of an acute crisis of rule over Brexit and growing trade war and economic crisis globally. The rail strike went ahead after two days of talks between SWR and the RMT ended acrimoniously last week—despite the union already having agreed a tentative deal with SWR in November. RMT officials say the company has reneged on that agreement, which would have "cost the company absolutely nothing."

SWR knows that any lost revenue due to the strike will be picked up by the taxpayer, as the government has agreed behind closed doors to fund any losses. The RMT estimates the government has already indemnified SWR to the tune of over £41 million for 33 days of lost revenue during strikes over the past two years. It calculates that December's strikes, on top of strikes earlier this year, will see the company lose a further £45 million. This means that if December's strikes continue as planned, the government will have funded a single rail company to the tune of £86 million.

The state-sanctioned operation is of a piece with last week's announcement by the Tories that the party will introduce "minimum services" legislation. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said it would "require rail employers and unions to enter into Minimum Service Agreements (MSAs), which would oblige both parties to operate minimum service levels in the event of strike action. MSAs would set in advance the number and nature of staff who would remain at work during any

strike.”

Were MSA’s to be breached during industrial action, the strike would be made illegal. Shapps stated that, “Such a requirement is the norm in many places, including... France, Italy, Spain, and Belgium.” This strikebreaking move would be a precursor to banning strikes by any group of workers deemed “essential.” In Spain such authoritarian measures have been used against strikers fighting the mass austerity imposed by successive governments and the European Union since 2008. In December 2010, striking Spanish air traffic controllers were marched at gunpoint by the military from a hotel where they were meeting and forced to work under police guard. In Sri Lanka, the government smashed a rail strike in the summer after invoking a draconian essential services order.

RMT leader Mick Cash correctly described the latest measures as akin to those of a “right-wing junta” and pledged the union would fight their introduction. The record of the RMT and entire Trades Union Congress (TUC) belies this rhetoric, which have done nothing to mobilise the working class against the raft of anti-strike laws introduced over the last four decades.

While SWR was plotting and stepping up plans to attack the workforce, the RMT made a last-minute plea with the company to enter talks at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)—the graveyard of countless struggles of the working class.

In a press release, the RMT stated that “the company point-blank refused to show any serious movement whatsoever... wrecking the efforts to broker a solution through the ACAS machinery.” Cash concluded by pleading, “The union remains available for talks and we have a deal to solve this dispute which is cost free for SWR worked up and ready to go. The company should grab it with both hands and avoid the disruption to services their actions will unleash.”

At the same time, the union announced it would not organise industrial action but, “press ahead with seeking a negotiated settlement to guards’ safety dispute on Northern Rail”.

Opposed to any mobilisation of rail workers in a joint fight, the RMT insists that nothing be done to undermine a Labour general election victory. It arranged that there be no strikes at SWR, or any other franchise, on election day.

The last thing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn wants is to come to office amid a mass wave of social anger and militancy. Labour’s shadow transport secretary Andy McDonald declared of SWR, “I’m hugely disappointed that they have taken this step [to end negotiations] and if they would do what the other train operators have done and give that guarantee and put those guards on the trains, this matter would be resolved imminently and people could go about their preparations for Christmas without any interruption whatsoever.” McDonald is acknowledging how the RMT and ASLEF have agreed, on a company by company basis, to implement different forms of DOO, including at ScotRail, Southern and Greater Anglia.

The RMT is doing everything to promote illusions that a Corbyn government would oppose the anti-strike laws. It sent a circular to members stating, “Tories to ban your right to strike!” and “Labour will stand up for your rights, jobs and conditions and introduce policies that will benefit rail workers...” They would “Repeal anti-trade union legislation—meaning better wages and conditions” [emphasis in original].

Labour’s manifesto speaks vaguely of removing “unnecessary restrictions” on industrial action, and pledges to scrap the Trade Union Act 2016 under which the number of workers required to vote in a strike ballot is set at a high threshold.

These pledges didn’t survive first contact with the enemy. Asked on BBC radio’s *Today* show if Labour would end the decades’ long ban on secondary picketing, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell replied, “No, no, we’re not, we’re creating a new climate in this country which is based upon a stakeholder economy where we all recognise we’ve got a stake in this economy, where we actually recognise we all have responsibilities as well.”

Workers at SWR, WMT and other franchises cannot fight alone. They must turn to a new strategy, based on fundamentally different principles—the international unity of workers and a socialist perspective—which places their interests above those of the global conglomerates who own the rail firms. The closest links must be forged with rail workers in France, Germany, throughout Europe and internationally. Rail workers must link their fight with lecturers, postal workers and health workers who face the same assault on their jobs and livelihoods.

This fight means rejecting the pro-capitalist, nationalist agenda of the trade unions and Labour Party. Workers must take the leadership of the dispute out of the hands of the unions through the building of democratic rank-and-file committees.



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