

# UK: RMT union betrays four-year struggle against Driver Only Operated trains at South Western Railway

Michael Barnes  
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The BBC has published details of an agreement reached between the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) and South Western Railway (SWR) management that removes door operations from train guards and imposes these on the train driver. The BBC reports, “SWR has ordered 90 new trains designed to work without a guard and the RMT has accepted drivers will operate the doors.”

The RMT’s deal with SWR is a grotesque betrayal of a four-year struggle by its 900 guards and 40 drivers against Driver Only Operated trains (DOO). The union intends to push through similar and worse deals against their members as part of its participation in the Conservative government’s Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG).

Guards at SWR, which operates commuter services from London Waterloo to south west London and south west England, held 74 strikes between 2017 and 2020. December 2019 saw the longest strike in railway history, lasting 27 days. The RMT then entered talks that soon collapsed with no agreement. To comply with anti-strike laws, SWR workers voted repeatedly to renew strikes that are only legal if re-balloted every six months.

More broadly, the RMT has betrayed a five-year struggle by 6,000 guards and thousands of drivers at eight different private rail franchises across the UK against various forms of DOO that watered down control over the safe operation of train doors. At each franchise, the RMT agreed a significant weakening of the role of the train guard in preparation for their ultimate removal.

Continued strikes at SWR were called off when the pandemic hit in March 2020. For the next 12 months,

via tripartite forums uniting the government, rail companies and unions, rotten deals were cooked up that paved the way for ramped-up exploitation and cuts across the rail network.

According to the BBC, the SWR agreement states that guards will “spend more time on customer service” while the “union is dropping previous claims that this [removal of door controls from the guard] compromises safety.”

The RMT’s decision to put their sellout deal to the vote—under the guise of a “referendum” on the company’s offer—was a cynical operation aimed at providing a veil of legitimacy to their rotten agreement with SWR executives. It follows a four-year campaign by the rail unions—including the RMT and ASLEF—to wear down workers’ opposition. In the end, 648 ballots were cast, with 516 voting in favour and 132 against.

It is unclear whether guards and drivers have received a copy of the full text of the RMT’s agreement with SWR. The RMT refused to provide a copy to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The BBC’s transport correspondent claimed the deal was “welcome news for passengers.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The deal is a major attack on passenger safety. Guards have more than 32 safety functions. They are trained to safely put out fires or evacuate trains where this is not possible; prevent trains from colliding following an accident; take charge of all emergency situations where the driver is either dead, seriously injured or incapacitated; coordinate with emergency services, and take a lead role in emergency situations on trains, from passenger illness to crime prevention.

Over the last five years, the government and the rail

companies have sought to end guards' control of door operation travelling in and out of stations. Since 2015, the rail unions' official position has been to insist that the driver should concentrate on signals and driving and the guard concentrates on the operation of the doors.

The RMT's deal with SWR has elicited widespread condemnation among rail workers, with many denouncing it as a "total sellout." The vote in favour is fundamentally a vote of no-confidence in the RMT with workers believing they could get nothing better as the union will not lead a fight against anything.

As news of the deal broke on the BBC, rail workers took to social media. A guard from the north of England commented, "I worry for us guards at Northern. We are still in dispute." Another wrote, "People keep saying we won because we aren't striking anymore, but I fear it is the calm before the storm. Especially with Southern and now SWR pushed into a corner." One guard commented, "It's a difficult situation for the members down there who let's not forget have taken 70+ days of action. However, this could have implications for all other [Train Operating Companies] whose members have also taken difficult action and the [RMT leadership] has let those members down by agreeing to put this item to a vote."

Similar agreements have been pushed through by the RMT at other train operators to water down the safety-critical role of guards. At ScotRail, the RMT declared a victory after forcing through a deal to have drivers release doors and guards close them. This is only a prelude to removing door operation completely from the guards and then slashing jobs.

On Southern Trains, the majority of guards had door controls taken from them and were transformed into On Board Supervisors (OBS). Guards in 2017 were threatened with a deadline—accept the OBS role or lose your job. The RMT's General Secretary, Mick Cash, pressured workers into accepting, saying it was the only way to protect their jobs.

A similar deal was done at Merseyrail where drivers in the ASLEF train drivers union refused to cross RMT picket lines. The RMT broke up this united struggle and ended the strikes after agreeing a deal like the one at ScotRail.

Conductors at West Midlands Trains mounted strikes against DOO in November 2019. They manned pickets

across the network and faced off an organised strike breaking operation with trains manned by managers and supervisors who were members of the TSSA union. Drivers honoured the picket lines and brought the entire region including London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Coventry and Crewe to a standstill.

As with every other strike against DOO, from this position of strength the RMT "negotiated" and pushed through a "driver opens doors, conductor closes" settlement.

The RMT's deal takes place in the middle of elections for a new general secretary, following Mick Cash's decision to step down. Steve Hedley is being promoted as a left-wing candidate by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. Yet Hedley, who is the union's Senior Assistant General Secretary, has uttered not a word of opposition to the union's deal at SWR.

The Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG) emerged out of the corporatist Rail Industry Coronavirus Forum (RICF) that suppressed strikes throughout the first 12 months of the pandemic. In the face of a collapse in passenger revenues, the RIRG has sought to shore up taxpayer subsidies to the franchise owners and recoup losses from the backs of rail workers. The RMT's participation in the RIRG has seen a national two-year pay freeze demanded by the government, the sabotage of the four-year fight at SWR, and demands for thousands of jobs cuts, including cuts to rail safety maintenance at the government run rail infrastructure company Network Rail.

The RMT is a trusted ally of the "herd immunity" government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Rail workers need new organisations—action committees that are independent of the unions and which unite workers in struggle across the UK and internationally against the transnational transport corporations.



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