

RMT joins Conservative government's Rail Recovery Group: A conspiracy against rail workers

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Last month, newly elected Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) General Secretary Mick Lynch issued a press statement boasting, “Our message to the employers and the politicians is that RMT stands ready to campaign and fight against pay freezes, cuts to safety and conditions... We call on the rest of the labour movement to stand strong and mobilise against any new age of austerity which makes working people pay for the Covid crisis.”

Outgoing General Secretary Mick Cash insisted, “It is crucial that the whole union now unites behind Mick Lynch as General Secretary and gives him the support that he will need as RMT focuses on delivering ?for our members in what we know will be tough days ahead.”

Behind these militant-sounding words, the RMT has joined the Conservative government's Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG) that is committed to making the very “pay freezes, cuts to safety and conditions” and “austerity” the RMT claims publicly to oppose.

A document marked “Strictly Confidential”, dated January 13, makes this clear. It sets out the RIRG's “terms of reference” aimed at slashing wages, jobs, pensions and safety across the rail network and train operating companies.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government is using the financial crisis triggered by the pandemic—including the collapse in passenger revenue and the “bankruptcy” of the train company franchise holders to force a major restructure of the rail network.

Citing the government's £6.5 billion coronavirus subsidies to the rail industry in 2020, the RIRG document declares, “the financial commitment from the government is not unlimited and is not sustainable with increasing pressure coming from the Treasury to ensure that the industry remains viable”.

Train operating companies must achieve “sustainability” in the “short term” through “cost savings”, the document states. Such cost savings include:

- “an industry-wide transfer and re-deployment scheme”

- “reviewing existing insourcing and outsourcing arrangements”
- “flexible working”
- “a sustainable pension scheme”
- “safety and overall performance that increases value for money”
- “policies and working practices resulting in reduced costs”

This amounts to a declaration of war against rail workers. “Staffing costs make up circa 30 percent element of the total operating costs of the railway”, the RIRG's document states, making clear where cuts must fall.

During the pandemic, most of the private rail operating companies temporarily relinquished their contracts. Emergency Measures Agreements (EMAs) were put in place, transferring nearly all revenue and cost risk to the public purse. The government's Rail Recovery Plan aims to slash costs before retendering to the likes of Abellio, First, Virgin, etc., who will swoop like vultures to gorge on increased exploitation and profits.

Rail Minister Chris Heaton-Harris approached rail employers and unions to join the RIRG in mid-December, but the RMT has remained virtually silent on its participation. The sole mention to members was a January 19 letter stating that the RMT executive had agreed “in principle” that the union would be “prepared to participate in such arrangements”, despite acknowledging that its aim was to “reduce the operational costs of the railway.”

By January 13, rail union members of the RIRG had been confirmed: Mick Whelan, the General Secretary of the train drivers' union ASLEF; Mick Cash, General Secretary RMT; Manuel Cortes, General Secretary of the white-collar union TSSA; Harish Patel, National Officer for Rail UNITE. They are working together with Andrew Haines, the Chief Executive Network Rail; Steve Montgomery, Managing Director First Rail; Pauline Holroyd, Group Human Resources Director Network Rail; Andy Meadows, Human

Resources Director Abellio (Chair); and Leila Rahimzadeh, Industry HR Partner RDG (Governance and Secretariat).

The RMT, ASLEF, TSSA and Unite will report directly to the Tory government. The RIRG “will liaise with both the DfT [Department for Transport] and the relevant ministers to ensure that any changes that are introduced are aligned with the key principles set out in the Williams Review.”

The Williams Review, chaired by former British Airways chief executive Keith Williams, was initially commissioned by Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps. Its outcome is the joint Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail. This sets out the government’s proposals to rescue rail privatisation following the collapse of the private franchise model introduced in 1996. With its announcement last week of the launch of Great British Railways, the Johnson government is seeking to exploit the image of its nationalised predecessor, British Rail. But private companies will operate beneath the new network’s umbrella. Chapter six of the review states, “The government is... determined to maintain and increase private involvement and private finance to supplement the money paid by the state ...” The RMT created illusions in the review, published a submission to it and opposed any fight to mobilise workers against the government’s plans.

Williams’ review called for a 20 percent reduction in operating costs. Rail unions are now tasked with identifying and implementing the required cuts—and more. The document states, “It is proposed that the RIRG shall provide a vehicle for employers and unions to consider proposed plans and measures which have been identified as well as consider other ideas necessary to address the funding shortfall. In doing so consideration shall be given by RIRG to how any such measures shall be taken forward.”

The RIRG shows the reliance of the Johnson government on its corporatist partnership with the trade unions: “It is recognised that RIRG shall provide an additional mechanism for engaging with the trade unions but shall not seek to go outside the existing collective bargaining arrangements unless there is agreement on all sides to do so”. While cuts have been achieved at British Gas and elsewhere via the imposition of fire-and-rehire contracts, the Johnson government prefers to utilise its “existing collective bargaining arrangements” with the rail unions.

Throughout this year’s RMT elections, not a single candidate denounced the RIRG or called for a withdrawal from the corporatist body. The RIRG was not mentioned by any of the candidates for general secretary. So-called socialist candidate Steve Hedley, who was actively promoted by the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, remained silent on the topic.

Already, in a sign of things to come, a two-year pay freeze was announced at the end of January 2021 for 62,000 rail

workers across 22 operating companies. Months later, Cash threatened “coordinated national strike action”, words which that have since evaporated.

In early April, the BBC published details of an agreement between RMT and South Western Railway (SWR) to remove door operations from train guards, imposing these duties on train drivers. This deal marked the betrayal of a four-year struggle by 900 guards and 40 drivers against Driver Only Operated trains (DOO).

RIRG emerged out of the Rail Industry Coronavirus Forum (RICF). The RMT’s participation in this secretive body led to the suppression of strikes throughout the first 12 months of the pandemic. Through its participation in the Tory government’s RICF, the RMT has cemented its role as an arm of the state. Its verbal posturing as a militant union is window dressing, aimed at deceiving an angry and restless workforce. The RMT has now been rewarded alongside ASLEF, TSSA and Unite, with a central role in the RIRG.

According to reports on social media, over 3,000 London bus workers have applied to join the RMT, seeking a way forward against Unite’s open collusion with the bus companies. But the experience of rail workers with the RMT must serve as a sharp warning. Despite the RMT’s promotion as a “left-wing” union, they have the same corporatist and pro-company agenda as Unite. It is essential for bus, rail and London Underground workers to break from the pro-company, corporatist trade unions and form rank-and-file organisations of struggle.



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