

UK rail workers strike against pay restraint and inferior terms and conditions

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29 June 2021

A series of strikes have been called across the rail network in the past few months involving conductors, ticket examiners and maintenance engineers in the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT).

Taken against the private operators, the disputes are primarily in opposition to pay restraint—an attack facilitated by the RMT's participation in the Rail Industry Coronavirus Forum (RICF) with the government, alongside the other rail unions, at the start of the pandemic.

In the name of “Working Together”, the trade unions agreed to the suppress any expression of workers’ independent interests based on the claim that they would be upheld through collaboration with the private operators.

Instead throughout the pandemic rail workers have been subjected to an ever-present threat to their safety due to the combined impact of Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative government abandoning lockdowns early to reopen the economy and the private operators’ drive to restore revenue collection under the most hazardous conditions. At Christmas time, Great Western Railway (GWR) and South Western Railway were forced to cancel train services due to the shortage of rail staff resulting from workplace outbreaks of the virus, with GWR reporting one in four drivers having to self-isolate and 10 percent of staff affected at its depots in south west England.

In January, the government announced a two-year pay freeze for 62,000 rail workers across 22 operating companies under conditions in which inflation has continued to rise—especially for food and other essentials.

While rail workers safety and pay is sacrificed, the private operators have received full protection from the economic fallout of the pandemic through reduced passenger usage by a huge government hand out estimated to now stand at £12 billion.

The RMT has set out to build a reputation as the most militant of all the trade unions, but during the pandemic it has proven to be no less subservient to the demands of the government and private operators. It has been forced into strike action only because the toleration of rail workers of its partnership with the train companies and government has been exhausted.

The union is working to ensure that numerous disputes remain isolated and prevented from spreading. While from the standpoint of rhetoric the RMT has denounced the profiteering of the private operators, its overarching concern is to preserve and deepen its working relations with management and company shareholders as guarantors of “industrial peace” and corporate profits.

This led to the pathetic spectacle at East Midlands Railway (EMR) of the RMT setting up a negotiating table outside the headquarters of the company in Nottingham on June 20, ahead of consecutive 24 hour strikes on Sundays that commenced from June 27 and are due to continue until mid-August. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch stated, “To make things easier for the company to make genuine proposals to end this dispute we will be bringing the negotiating table to them this Sunday.”

The RMT preaches conciliation with EMR when the strike has been provoked by the company imposing inferior terms and conditions on some conductors, including a reduction of £5,500 during the first year of employment, as well as forcing them to work additional hours that are not part of current terms and conditions.

EMR is owned by Netherlands-based transnational Abellio, which also operates ScotRail running 95 percent of rail services in Scotland. ScotRail has been hit by strike action over demands by conductors and ticket examiners for rest day payments on equal terms to train drivers. The strike on Sundays was started by conductors in late March and was joined by ticket examiners in June, which has led to a reduction in services operated by the company to just

15 percent.

The company came to a separate agreement with train drivers who are members of the ASLEF union and have received enhanced payments for rest day working. The company has denied this to the conductors who perform up to 32 safety critical tasks on board the train. The agreement for drivers signed by ASLEF includes an additional payment of £375 and has been extended from its initial expiry date of January, but only until October. It is a policy of divide and conquer that relies entirely on the trade union bureaucracy collectively maintaining divisions among rail workers.

The RMT has decried rail drivers being given a “bung” and denounced their “preferential treatment”. But it will not challenge the ASLEF leadership’s betrayal and never has.

ScotRail fleet maintenance staff also took strike action for two days from June 15 at its depot in Perth, which is used to refuel and store trains overnight. The strike was backed by 80 percent of (RMT) members after a manager who was the subject of a collective grievance by 16 workers was promoted, after having been found guilty of bullying and harassment.

The RMT is also focusing its efforts on appeals to the Scottish National Party (SNP) government to commit to ending the franchise with Abellio and take the service back into public control. Its attempt to present the SNP government as an ally is bogus. As has been the case throughout the UK, the rail franchises have been effectively taken back under government control through the Emergency Measures Agreement (EMA), which shielded the private operators from financial losses. It is estimated that the Scottish government has pumped a total of £452 million into the coffers of Abellio and Serco, which runs the Caledonia Sleeper service. The Scottish government is, moreover, just as committed to opposing pay rises as Abellio when it takes over as the “Service Operator of last resort” and has refused invitations to meet with the RMT over a wage agreement for 2021.

The Caledonia Sleeper service has also been hit by a strike against the pay freeze after RMT members voted by an 85 percent majority for action. An eleven-day strike by RMT members between June 15 and June 26 led to the full cancellation of the overnight service between London and the Scottish Highlands. The RMT attempted to neuter the strike through calls to Serco to attend arbitration talks, which the company refused. The strike has been followed by a ban on overtime and rest-day working.

On June 17, the RMT issued a press release stating that

it was launching a “Bust the transport worker pay freeze” campaign, almost half a year after it was announced by the government. It issued no dates for strike balloting or any demands of its own in terms of wage increases.

While the RMT claims to be preparing for “a summer of strikes” over pay, it continues its corporatist collusion with the Johnson government to tie workers hand and foot to the restructuring of the rail system in the form of the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG).

The RMT has taken its place alongside the other unions represented on the rail network, together with the private operators and government infrastructure agency, Network Rail, in a body that will report directly to the government on a £2 billion cost cutting agenda.

In a letter to the RMT membership this month, the union’s National Executive Committee claimed it was participating in the RIRG to protect workers’ interests. But the letter admitted, “Your NEC has noted that the basis of the agreement has the objective of reducing the overall operating costs of the railway as the Government wants to reduce its subsidy. This will affect the overall number of jobs, working practices and roles and other arrangements.”

The RMT will be discussing how this is done and what help it can provide in stifling opposition, nothing else. As the WSWS warned earlier in a detailed analysis of the RIRG, its central purpose is 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 workers should be warned. The RMT’s engagement in the RIRG will see it function ever more openly as an industrial police force against the growing resistance to yet more concessions. Rank-and-file committees, democratic organisations of mass struggle, are urgently required to mount a counterattack against the rail operators, their government backers, and the trade unions acting as de facto coalition partners in this conspiracy against the working class.



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