

RMT defends collaboration with UK government's Rail Industry Recovery Group as opposition grows

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On June 15, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) national executive confirmed they will continue to participate in the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG) initiated by Boris Johnson's Conservative government.

The RMT, alongside other rail unions ASLEF, TSSA and Unite, has endorsed an Enabling Framework Agreement (EFA) with Network Rail and the train operating companies. The parties have agreed "to address efficiency and cost savings" as part of industry-wide plans by the Tory government to "rebuild and modernise" the railways. Rail franchise contracts forfeited during the pandemic by transport giants Abellio, First and Arriva will be resumed as soon as the reforms are in place.

Behind the talk of "modernisation" and "efficiency"—euphemisms for capitalist restructuring and exploitation—the RIRG is set to unleash the biggest attacks on rail workers since the railways were privatised by the Conservative government in 1994-97, a policy the subsequent Blair Labour government refused to reverse. Staff and passengers will be made to pay for billions in government bailout funds handed to the rail companies during the coronavirus pandemic, with the rail unions serving as chief enforcers for the Tories.

An exposure of the RIRG's terms of reference published by the WSWs on June 2 was widely read by transport workers. Headlined, "RMT joins Conservative government's Rail Recovery Group: A conspiracy against rail workers", the article examined a January 13 "Strictly Confidential" document, with the WSWs concluding, "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."

Since then, RMT general secretary Mick Lynch has sought to fend off growing criticism over the RMT's participation in the RIRG. On June 15, Lynch wrote to members announcing the union's National Executive Committee had voted to continue participation in the RIRG despite "noting" that the Enabling Framework 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, roles and other arrangements."

Lynch offered the following arguments to justify the RMT's ongoing participation in the RIRG: 1) the "RMT should continue to participate in the processes as we need to protect the interests of our members" and 2) "RMT participation in these processes will not prevent your union from defending our members' jobs, pay and conditions".

Lynch's claims are deeply cynical. If the RMT were a genuine workers' organisation it would boycott the RIRG, denounce the rail franchise companies as pandemic profiteers, and mobilise transport workers in an industrial and political offensive against the Johnson government's plans. But the RMT, despite covering some of the most powerful sections of the

working class, is not a workers' organisation. Its programme is corporatism, i.e., a direct partnership with the employers and the state in the "national interest".

To this end, the RMT presents two faces. To rail workers, its leaders claim to be fighting cuts, including a "pay-freeze busting campaign" that proposes limited and isolated action when its hand is forced by the threat of a broader eruption of workers' anger. To the employers and the government, they offer themselves openly as partners in the RIRG "to address the efficiency and cost savings required".

The RMT postures as a militant and left-wing union for the sole purpose of trying to contain, divert and suppress workers' struggles. But as always, the devil is in the detail.

The Enabling Framework Agreement signed by the RMT pledges to "specifically address the workforce reforms and staff cost challenges the rail industry is facing". RMT officials will participate in "sub-groups" alongside railway industry executives that will "develop detailed outputs" to eliminate jobs, cut pay, slash pensions, and introduce "agile" and "flexible" work practices across the sector. The parties to the RIRG will report directly to Transport Secretary Grant Shapps.

What's in the agreement?

The agreement identifies a £2 billion annual shortfall caused by lost passenger revenue during the pandemic. The resulting financial crisis is described as an "opportunity" for industry-wide "workforce reforms and cost savings". While train operating companies were handed billions in subsidies over the past year, the working class will be shown no such mercy. The premise of the RIRG is that the working class must foot the bill for the crisis of capitalism.

The agreement includes the following:

Pay freeze: The current two-year pay-freeze for all but the lowest-paid rail workers (on £24,000 or less) is set to be extended, with the agreement stating, "we will review the basis for future annual pay review discussions to take into consideration the longer-term affordability and sustainability of the rail industry".

Redundancies: The agreement states that "the industry will require fewer, and in some cases changes to roles". As a result, jobs will be targeted for destruction via grossly misnamed "Employment Security Measures". These include an "Industry-wide Special Voluntary Severance Scheme", an "Industry-wide Voluntary Redeployment Scheme" and a "Re-skilling and Re-training Programme". These will be used to eliminate jobs and pile on workloads for remaining staff. The agreement adds,

“many future roles are expected to become multi-functional and therefore employees will need to be equipped with the necessary skills.” A “recruitment freeze” will be used to further slash staff numbers.

The RMT has given its support to these measures, claiming to oppose only “compulsory” redundancies. Workers targeted for “voluntary” severance will have a gun placed to their heads: either take a pay-out now, or risk losing out when you are sacked.

Sackings: If the required number of job cuts have not been made by December 31, 2021, the EFA states that compulsory redundancies will begin. Moreover, the agreement’s supposed “moratorium” on forced redundancies is tied to “reducing overall operating costs”. It threatens, “By no later than the end of 2021 if there is not sufficient evidence of progress or if discussions break down, the proposed employee support measures in this agreement will be amended or withdrawn.”

Exactly what interests are served by participating in such a charade? To ask the question is to answer it.

By their participation in the RIRG, the RMT, ASLEF, Unite and TSSA are endorsing its outrageous threats against rail workers. RMT officials will use these same threats as a battering ram, telling workers, “If we don’t accept these cuts, forced sackings will follow”.

In the next six months, progress must be made on a raft of reforms including “flexible working hours”, “robust working arrangements for Sundays” and “passenger service roles becoming more flexible and multi-functional both at stations and on-board”. Plans for driver-only trains will be progressed as safety-critical guards are replaced by low-paid onboard attendants juggling fare revenue, snacks, drinks, and passenger assistance. The agreement envisages a culture of “continuous improvement and removal of outdated practices”.

This includes plans for “reducing the entry age for new train drivers”, “consideration of Employer Justified Retirement Age, e.g. train drivers” and “offering employee apprenticeships across the range of industry roles”. Mickey Mouse apprenticeships will see young people used as cheap labour based on minimal training. The agreement alludes to this. It calls for, “Revising current training methods and practices to a competency-based approach, enhancing the quality of training methods through use of modern technology.”

Pensions: The agreement states progress must be made to ensure pension arrangements “are affordable and sustainable for the medium to long term”. This is an explosive issue, and the agreement is silent on the detail. But the RIRG is set to overhaul current pension arrangements that are considered “too expensive” by private transport operators and the UK government.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Transport Secretary Grant Shapps would be incapable of enforcing this agenda without their partnership with the rail unions. The text of the agreement acknowledges this. While RIRG “sub-groups” will develop “detailed outputs” to smash jobs, pay and pensions, “implementation” will take place “through the established collective bargaining arrangements”.

To top it off, the RMT has agreed a “Mutual Respect Code” with the employers, pledging to “support each other” in light of the “pressure” (from below!) that workplace change will bring. The RMT has pledged to maintain strict confidentiality, “including confidentiality over dissemination of any relevant information that is shared notwithstanding that it is understood that all parties will need to periodically report on progress to their executive committees/boards and to key stakeholders including DfT and relevant Government departments, TPR and the RPS Trustee.” The agreement promises “open communication” with the DfT and the Tory government, but secrecy against workers.

The RMT’s participation in the RIRG is so naked that the pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP) has stepped forward as political attorneys for the RMT National Executive Committee. A June 30 article in *The Socialist*, written by “Socialist Party members in RMT” is headlined, “Post-pandemic railway battles loom, rail unions must prepare for action”.

The authors claim, “RMT has not signed up to the proposals contained within the document, despite the impression given by reports in the press. The union leadership has already launched a campaign to smash the two-year pay freeze, which is welcome. However, it is important that the RMT leadership makes it absolutely clear to members that by participating in the RIRG it will not endorse or even consider the atrocious proposals within their framework document.”

“Despite RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch emailing members explaining the union’s opposition to the proposals, we cannot overestimate the potential for the capitalist media to twist reality and confuse members into believing otherwise. Therefore, the leadership must redouble its efforts to ensure that it is made clear to the bosses, and the membership in particular, that we will not tolerate any attacks on our members’ jobs and living standards.”

Traditionally, the way to oppose an agreement is to refuse to sign it. The effect of this in the RMT’s case would be to withdraw from participation in the RIRG. But as the RMT has publicly acknowledged, the NEC has done no such thing. The Socialist Party’s claim that the RMT has “not signed” the agreement is a politically desperate deception.

The SP promotes the RMT’s toothless campaign against the Johnson government’s pay-freeze but is clearly worried that such efforts will be insufficient to silence workers’ suspicions and anger, hence their friendly advice to the RMT leadership to “redouble its efforts” to deny they support the RIRG.

The Socialist Party’s concern is not the “capitalist media” but rail workers’ emerging opposition to the RMT’s dirty backroom deal. This opposition finds expression in the growing authority and readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*. In April, Socialist Party newsletter *The Red Line* pointed explicitly to rail workers’ anger over the union’s collaboration with the RIRG: “it has alarmed many RMT members that our union has signed joint statements with employers and the government declaring that we are working with the rail industry in the national interest or that we are closely collaborating with employers. It is misleading to suggest that we have one national interest that is the same as our bosses.”

But support for the “national interest”, i.e., the profits of the rail companies and British capitalism, is the basic strategy of the RMT and of the corporatist trade unions in general. It is one shared in practice by the Socialist Party, whose members and supporters serve as RMT officials and reps. The Socialist Party merely advises their “comrades” on the RMT executive to better conceal their pro-capitalist agenda by a more effective use of left-wing rhetoric. But the mask is slipping, social reality is asserting itself, and rail workers are beginning to see the truth.

The WSWs invites all railway workers looking for a way to fight back to contact us and discuss the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the rail unions to prepare to resist the Johnson government’s plans.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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