

RMT attempts to stifle growing strike movement across UK rail network

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Strikes are breaking against the attack by multiple rail companies on wages, conditions and pensions. Three train operating companies (TOCs) are presently affected, Hull Trains, East Midlands Railway (EMR) and Abellio ScotRail, with the rail unions doing all they can to contain disputes and keep them isolated from each other.

At Hull Trains, workers are opposing the company's decision to close its final salary pension scheme and replace it with an inferior defined contribution (DC) scheme. Where final salary schemes offer a guaranteed return, DC schemes depend on investment returns and annuity rates at the time of retirement. The switch to the inferior method of calculating retirement benefits has become the stock in trade of employers in the private and public sector to raid worker's pensions.

Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) members will strike every Sunday during August. They have resumed a ban on overtime and rest-day working throughout the month.

Hull Trains Group is owned by parent FirstGroup, one of the largest rail and train operators in the UK. The RMT has worked to demobilise opposition to the attack on pensions, which was announced in October last year. The first move by the union was to suspend strike action following a strong mandate earlier this year. This was to pursue fruitless negotiations at the governments' arbitration service ACAS.

First Group's "final offer" included an additional company contribution for existing members of the pension scheme and increased the proposed maximum level of company contribution to 15 percent of salary. It claims there is a £15 million deficit in the scheme which they will need to cover.

The RMT says this amount would be required to "make the scheme self-sufficient on a solvency basis,"

but nobody is suggesting the company is liable for the sum. Instead, RMT officials have enthused about how well funded the Hull Trains pension scheme is. General secretary Mick Lynch called it "a well-funded scheme with a healthy valuation report and there is absolutely no need for the company to take this drastic step of closing it down."

Accepting the valuation report paves the way for the union to agree closing other final salary schemes if reports identify shortfalls or crises. Lynch made clear that the union is still available for talks.

Although pensions are an issue across the entire transport network, the RMT has made no attempt to broaden the dispute beyond Hull Trains.

EMR senior conductors and train managers will strike every Sunday from August 8 to the end of September over safe staffing of the company's new Class 360 electric trains being introduced between London and Corby.

In contrast to the appeals made by the RMT for conciliation, management at EMR has denounced workers who have worked throughout the pandemic at great risk for damaging its economic recovery. The company has imposed new working arrangements on multi-unit 12-carriage trains, deploying only one train manager where there is no access between the units in a clear breach of safety. The union is calling for "a second safety-critical person ... in each portion of the multi-unit trains."

Workers are also refusing to work 12-car trains alone. EMR cynically insisted it "does not operate any 12-carriage trains," and said the trains have been in service since May without operational incident. EMR said it had consulted with the RMT "for six months before these trains were brought into service."

Earlier this year EMR conductors voted to strike

against inferior new contracts, with a £5,500 reduction for the first year of employment and additional rostered hours that were explicitly excluded under agreed terms and conditions.

EMR conductors cannot entrust their fight to the RMT, as the entire experience with the determined effort to defeat Driver Operation Only (DOO) trains has proven. The five-year struggle by 6,000 guards at eight rail franchises ended with the RMT making agreements which undermined the safety critical role of guards and established the basis for their eventual removal.

Ticket collectors and conductors are also involved in ongoing strikes at Abellio ScotRail in Scotland, demanding equal overtime pay with drivers. ScotRail train cleaners began a separate overtime and rest day working ban last month over the same issue. The dispute continues to spread. Gateline workers have begun industrial action short of a strike with a rest day working, overtime and higher-grade duty ban.

ScotRail, the last British Rail train operator to be privatised, will be taken back into public ownership next March by the Scottish government. Scottish National Party (SNP) Transport Secretary Michael Matheson decided in 2019 to terminate Abellio's ten-year franchise early because of concerns about performance, and the Dutch company's failure to reach agreement over the funding for the last stage of its contract.

The RMT has appealed to Transport Scotland, the SNP-led Scottish government and the company "to break their silence, get out of the bunker and sit down with us to negotiate a fair and just settlement."

ScotRail says it is facing a desperate financial crisis and has only been able to continue during the pandemic thanks to more than £400 million from the Scottish government. Holyrood says no further money is available.

ScotRail has now circulated a report by Professor Iain Docherty, a former non-executive director of the company and Transport Scotland, calling for service cuts, ticket office closures and job losses. His recommendations would see more than 85,000 rail services cut annually, up to 140 ticket offices closed, and the loss of more than 1,000 jobs. The government and Transport Scotland deny any involvement in the report.

The RMT continues to pose as a fighting union

opposing cuts, while acting as a corporate partner of management.

Lynch accurately described Docherty's report as "a blatant attempt to further a cuts agenda that will be devastating." But workers concerned about the future of Scottish ticket offices should recall that the RMT presided over the closure of all 256 ticket offices on the London Underground without a struggle, shortly after negotiating the elimination of the conductor grade from the London Overground. It has again this week called off scheduled strike action on the Tube.

ScotRail had attempted to break the strike by using managers as a scab workforce. This has been a frequent tactic, endangering passengers by using managers who are not safety-qualified to keep trains running.

Members of the Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) union, representing these team managers, have now voted for action in protest. This was based on a 62.5 percent vote for strike action. The TSSA have warned ScotRail of likely industrial action, turning a mandate for action into an appeal to management for compromise. The TSSA have previously insisted they could not get involved in disputes such as that over DOO. By claiming that this would constitute secondary action, they sanctioned strikebreaking by their members.

The real role of RMT regarding the restructuring of rail workers jobs and conditions can be measured by its direct participation on the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG). The RMT, along with the other rail unions, have signed up to an enabling framework agreement with the private operators to implement the largest restructuring of the rail industry since privatisation in 1994—which clearly targets jobs, wages and conditions across the board. Its support for this agenda is setting the stage for an open conflict between rail workers and the RMT.

Workers must draw the necessary conclusions and build rank-and-file committees independent of the rail unions to prepare the necessary fight against the government and rail companies.



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