

RMT offers fake “opposition” to UK rail industry redundancy scheme

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The Johnson government’s Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG) has begun a national roll-out of the “voluntary severance scheme” outlined under the terms of its Enabling Framework Agreement published in June. It aims to slash thousands of jobs across the national rail system both at state owned Network Rail—which maintains the track and signalling network—and among the private companies which operate train services.

The RIRG is overseeing the largest restructuring of the national rail since privatisation in 1994 and aims to make cost savings of £2 billion per year. The former model of privatisation, with private operators tendering bids for separate franchise operations, is being replaced by managed contracts in which the government will pay fixed fees which guarantee profit margins.

At the start of the pandemic the franchise system was suspended with the government covering all company losses. The Johnson government shovelled £12 billion into the coffers of the private operators, the equivalent of £22 million per day. While the government “nationalised” losses for the private sector it has decided that such subsidies are no longer sustainable. Passenger revenue has declined and is only anticipated to return to 80 percent of pre-pandemic levels, with the costs passed onto rail workers through savage cuts.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT), along with rail unions ASLEF, TSSA and Unite, have signed on to this through their participation with rail industry bosses in the RIRG that reports directly to the Department for Transport and the Johnson government. The Enabling Framework Agreement (EFA) endorsed by the rail unions established a timetable for mass redundancies as the first phase in a restructuring exercise that will overhaul terms, conditions and pensions.

As the EFA states: “phased implementation as elements are agreed will commence as soon as practically possible with the aim to conclude all elements by no later than 31st December 2021. The timeline for pensions may be subject to different timescales.” The word “elements” is used to conceal proposals for cuts and job losses.

A code of mutual respect between the employers and unions has been agreed in principle, cementing their collaboration against rail workers. Section 4 of the EFA reads: “we all have a responsibility to respect each other, acknowledge we will have different points of view, support each other and, wherever possible, keep channels of communication open. As Leaders of our respective areas, we have an opportunity to demonstrate how we can work together through difficult times. Further detail on how we can demonstrate this will be outlined in a separate Mutual Respect Code.”

Such “mutual respect” is currently being demonstrated in the redundancy scheme being rolled out across the railways. A report produced by the RIRG marked OFFICIAL – SENSITIVE outlines the terms of its voluntary severance scheme and makes clear that railway workers are to be shown no mercy.

Recipients will receive just two weeks wages for every year of service, capped at 72 weeks or 35 years. The company has full discretion over which applicants will be accepted or rejected. It is a one-off discretionary scheme that is time limited, the report states. Clearly the aim is to pressure workers into applying for voluntary severance for fear of compulsory redundancy being imposed with worse terms at a later date.

In a desperate face-saving operation aimed at concealing their own culpability, the RMT issued a letter to members on August 6 claiming to oppose the voluntary severance scheme, despite having signed up

to it in the EFA.

Section 1 of the EFA stated that employers have committed to a policy of no compulsory redundancies prior to December 31, 2021. The agreement stated, “if there is not sufficient evidence of progress or if discussions break down, the proposed employee support measures [including the voluntary severance scheme] in this agreement will be amended or withdrawn.” In other words, compulsory redundancies will begin in the New Year if not enough “progress” is made with voluntary applications and if the pace of broader cuts is deemed insufficient.

Addressing members, RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said: “RMT’s NEC does not accept or endorse this employers job cuts scheme, which is directly funded by the government in pursuit of their objective of stripping thousands of jobs from the industry. The scheme they are using does not even meet the standards of our existing agreements on reorganisation and flies in the face of our usual processes.”

The fact that RMT’s only “objection” to the voluntary redundancy scheme is that it fails to comply with previous redundancy agreements underscores the RMT’s refusal to oppose the culling of jobs in principle.

Lynch concludes his letter with the usual RMT theatrics, “any attempt to push towards compulsory redundancies will be categorically resisted.”

Such talk has already been proved hot air in relation to Network Rail. The RMT claimed back in March that it was moving into a “national dispute” footing over plans to eliminate thousands of jobs among its 20,000 members in track maintenance and signalling by September. It launched its “No cuts at Network Rail” campaign in mid-April, condemning the “jobs cull” and the safety risks posed by halving critical safety maintenance work, which has consisted of nothing more than a page on the union’s website and a media campaign.

While not lifting a finger to oppose the attack on rail workers’ jobs and violation of safety, it now states four months on, as redundancies take effect, that it is prepared to “campaign and fight” but only if “industrial action is necessary” and with an added caveat that this will only be in the event of compulsory redundancies.

Even if it is forced into such action, its purpose will be to corral opposition back into the corporate and

government framework it has sworn itself into. In the meantime, such empty threats serve only to forestall any genuine resistance.

The RMT has fraudulently claimed that its co-operation in the RIRG is to protect its membership. This only demonstrates how integrated it has become into the structures of the rail companies and with the government’s looting of public finances to shore up the corporations and their shareholders. The RMT accepts the entire premise of the Johnson government’s RIRG: that rail workers and passengers must pay for the financial crisis triggered by the pandemic.

The rash of strikes which are already breaking out across the rail network clearly indicates that workers want to fight for equal pay, the defence of pensions and against risks to public safety, but this is being shackled by the RMT and rail unions which act as corporate partners and agents of the government.

This is the situation which confronts workers in every sector. Rail workers should form rank-and-file committees to unify their fight with bus workers, truck drivers and every other section of the working class entering into struggle against the criminal mishandling of the pandemic and its use as a pretext to overhaul jobs and conditions to ensure even greater profits for the corporate elite.

We appeal to all rail workers who are interested in taking up this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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