

UK rail cleaners strike against poverty pay

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Hundreds of rail cleaners employed by Churchill Group at Govia Thameslink Railway, HS1, Southeastern Railway and Eurostar have voted for industrial action to fight for improved pay and conditions.

The cleaners, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), are demanding £15 an hour, along with sick pay and travel benefits currently denied to outsourced workers.

Around 1,000 outsourced cleaners were balloted by the RMT, returning a clear call for action—two of the ballots registered a 100 percent strike vote. The cleaners are paid just £8.91 per hour, far less than in-house cleaners who perform the same role. Churchill has refused to lift wages, despite profits of £11.1 million last year and dividends of £12 million to its parent company and £3.8 million to company directors.

During the pandemic, cleaners have braved hazardous conditions to protect the public from infection. But outsourced cleaners have been paid a pittance and were even denied sick pay. They have faced the prospect of massive debts or even losing their homes if they catch COVID-19. The strike vote demonstrates that cleaners have had enough and recognise their demands can only be met through struggle.

As the pandemic enters its third year, workers are seeking to reverse decades of wage cutting. Inflation is rising at its highest rate in 30 years and is expected to exceed 7 percent over spring. Andrew Bailey, Governor of the Bank of England, last week demanded “painful” wage restraint.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch said of last week’s ballot results, “Churchill and cleaning employers across the industry need to pay close attention to this result... our members have shown fantastic collective resolve in smashing the Tory ballot thresholds, so the ball is in Churchill’s court.”

Lynch’s response hands initiative to the company.

Churchill cleaners can place no faith in the RMT to lead their fight. The union has worked to isolate a series of disputes by contractors in recent weeks, including strikes by DHL caterers at Avanti West Coast and by rail cleaners employed by Atalian Servest.

Around 300 cleaners employed by Atalian Servest at Avanti West Coast Trains took strike action last month, rejecting an insulting 0.2 percent pay offer of 80 pence extra per week. The cleaners are among the lowest paid workers on the railways, earning approximately £270 per week. They walked off the job for 48-hours on January 20. Atalian Servest is a French-based multinational company with €3 billion annual turnover. It delivers a range of services including cleaning, technical maintenance and facility management, and employs 27,000 people across 7,000 sites in the UK.

Atalian Servest covers Avanti West Coast Trains, Chiltern Railways, London North Eastern Railway and Great Western Railway (GWR) and is one of the main cleaning providers across the UK rail network. Its contract with GWR is the largest, covering 102 stations. In 2016, Servest cleaners at GWR went on strike over serious bullying and allegations of discrimination, poor working conditions and low pay.

For all its denunciations of pandemic profiteering, the RMT has refused to confirm its own wage claim at Servest. A union press release noted, “Atalian Servest Ltd’s holding company paid a dividend to its French parent company of £10.8 million, a sum that would pay for more than 300 cleaners to get a pay rise to £11 an hour 12 times over and £15 an hour three times over.” But beyond this hypothetical calculation, the union gave no indication of its own line in the sand. A pay increase to £11 an hour for Servest workers would equate to just £10 extra a day. Servest workers should demand full pay parity and the same benefits as their in-house colleagues, including company sick pay, pensions contributions, annual leave and free rail travel.

No follow-up calls for industrial action at Servest have been issued. There is no update about the dispute on the RMT's website and the union's media office declined to confirm whether RMT officials are in negotiation with the company. The RMT has issued no call for joint action with workers at Churchill or with thousands of in-house cleaners across 28 Train Operating Companies being targeted by the Johnson government's Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG).

The RMT is an active partner in the RIRG that was initiated by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps to slash £2 billion per year and oversee the largest restructuring of the national railways since privatisation in 1994. The RMT, ASLEF, Unite and TSSA unions endorsed the Group's Enabling Framework Agreement (EFA) with the rail employers last June, including a code of mutual respect committing the parties to keep their plans against railworkers secret.

Despite the clear purpose of the RIRG as a battering ram against jobs, pay and pensions, the RMT has cited favourably the EFA's promise to "carry out a review and benchmarking exercise" of outsourced cleaning and catering companies to determine whether they should be brought in-house. In-house cleaners currently earn £24,000-£30,000 annually before tax depending on shift allocation. But some earn as little as £14,900 annually before tax. Given the scale of the Conservative government's cost-cutting demands, in-house cleaners must recognise the potential threat to their own jobs and support the contractors in struggle.

A railway cleaner from South West England told WSWS, "When people think of cleaners, the image of someone using a cleaning cloth, feather duster or vacuum often springs to mind. But the daily reality is very different.

"Railway cleaners deal with biohazards such as raw sewage from blocked and overflowing toilets, the safe disposal of drug paraphernalia such as syringes, used condoms, blood, sanitary products, vomit, discarded COVID masks, test kits and used tissues. Cleaners are sometimes responsible for the removal of dead animals hit by trains and the removal of blood from the trains' exterior. Graffiti and spray paint removal is also a common task.

"Sewage tanks underneath the trains often get blocked and require air to be pumped into them to move the blockage. If the procedure is done incorrectly

a blow-out of raw sewage can be pumped back into the train's toilet facility. It is our job to clean this up. Contract cleaners commonly face a lack of protective equipment and are forced to borrow or beg for gloves, masks and waterproofs to get the job done. Cleaners employed directly by train operating companies are offered free vaccination against Hepatitis and have full sickness protection. But contractors are denied such benefits, including free rail travel to and from work."

In June 2021, the RMT published a report, "Cleaning Up the Railways", exposing dangerous conditions by outsourced cleaning companies during the pandemic. It found "almost half the cleaners working on the network don't think they have enough staff to do their jobs properly." One third of cleaners reported their numbers had fallen in the last three years, while one in five reported numbers had fallen since the pandemic started. Cleaners considered their employers were placing profits before public health.

Rail privatisation carried out between 1994 and 1997 opened the floodgates for outsourcing with little resistance from the unions. The use of sub-contractors enabled the newly privatised rail operators to slash pay, terms and conditions, creating a two-tier workforce. Rail unions are calling for outsourced cleaning and catering to be brought back in-house. But both outsourced and in-house cleaners face a deepening threat to the conditions, pay and pensions.

Railway cleaners employed directly by the train companies cannot sit on the side-lines. The struggle at Churchill and Atalian Servest needs maximum support. With billions of pounds in cuts earmarked by the Johnson government, the drive to further outsource jobs is real. That is why all railworkers must join together through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to organise a fightback. The subordination of workers' livelihoods to corporate profit must be ended.

The WSWS invites railway cleaners to contact us with any information about your conditions and struggle.



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