

Churchill rail cleaners stage one day strike in London and south-east to fight low pay

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Hundreds of rail cleaners staged a 24-hour strike in London and across the south-east of England Wednesday, over low pay and for parity of workers' rights against the Churchill Group.

The company is contracted to provide cleaning services for train operators Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern, Southeastern, Eurostar and HS1. Picket lines were mounted at main railway stations in the capital, including Kings Cross, St Pancras and Victoria, as well as across the south and south-east coast in the largest-scale strike action by this section of workers.

In February, around a thousand cleaners who are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) voted unanimously in two ballots to strike for £15 an hour pay and the sick pay and travel entitlement denied to them as outsourced workers.

At Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern the contracted rail cleaners receive wages as low as the £8.91 an hour, the National Minimum Wage (NMW). Those on Southeastern, Eurostar and HS1 are paid the misnamed Real Living Wage (RLW) of £11.05 an hour in London and £9.90 outside the capital.

Churchill reported profits last year of £11.1 million while rail cleaners performing a socially critical role are paid a pittance and denied sick pay even in the extreme circumstances of the pandemic.

The RMT has shown that far from being unaffordable, paying the £15 hourly pay demand for all Churchill workers is the equivalent of the £22 million paid out in dividends to its shareholders of its parent company.

Rather than the broad mobilisation of workers necessary to beat Churchill, the RMT advocates an industrial and political strategy based on class compromise, concealed behind militant phrases.

The union is limiting strikes to set-piece and isolated

forms of action. It has placed a cordon around the fight at Churchill from other outsourced cleaners striking over the same issues, such as the 300 RMT members at Atalian Servest Ltd, contracted by Avanti West Coast.

Atalian Servest cleaners took part in their third round of strike action with a 48-hour stoppage one day after the strike at Churchill and are set to strike for two days again from March 10. They are paid £9.68 an hour, below the RLW, and again do not receive sick pay. The latest offer of the company amounts to an increase of 6 pence an hour for most cleaners outside of London. In contrast to Churchill the RMT does not formally submit a £15 hourly pay demand but argues for £11 an hour instead.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch has called on Atalian Servest to make a “better offer” and called on Churchill to make a “proper offer.” This is the tried and tested formula by trade unions for a process of re-balloting over negligible revisions to insulting offers in order to demobilise a fight.

The division of the rail cleaners fight is aimed at counteracting the growth of class consciousness among workers produced by the yawning social divide and anger over the pandemic profiteers. The treatment of rail cleaners brings into sharp relief the contempt shown to all key workers during the pandemic: officially venerated but denigrated in every other way in relation to their pay, terms and conditions.

The rising cost-of-living crisis, with inflation rising to 7.8 percent (RPI), has taken a particularly hard toll on poorly paid and brutally exploited rail cleaners. But this is within the context in which the pandemic and the rising cost of living have impacted disproportionately the entire working class in terms of lives and livelihoods.

The conditions exist for mobilising this social force

against the profit mad and criminally irresponsible corporations. A glimpse of this was seen with engineers not balloted by the RMT who refused to cross the picket line and joined rail cleaners at the Eurostar Temple Mills International depot in Leyton, East London.

The localisation of strikes animated by issues workers confront across the rail network is part of a containment exercise by the RMT while it sits alongside the employers and Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government in the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG). This corporatist body is based on the compliance of the unions in an unprecedented cost-cutting agenda.

As the WSWS explained in its previous article on the fight at Churchill:

“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.”

The rally organised by the RMT outside parliament on the day of action by Churchill workers to make [Prime Minister Boris] “Johnson listen” only served to illustrate the bankruptcy of the union's claims that the political establishment would be responsive to their needs. It was such a pro forma exercise that the RMT has not posted any report on the speeches by several MPs, including former Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn and Labour MP Richard Burgon, who attended the rally.

Their support consists of endorsing an Early Day Motion in Parliament on January 20. The hand-wringing motion professing shock at the abysmal conditions facing Churchill cleaners calls for the company to meet workers claims, with no reference to the £15 demand, and for the private train operators, “the clients”, to intercede to bring about a settlement. Even this toothless motion has only received the backing of 20 Labour MPs plus Corbyn (whose Labour whip has been removed) out of a grand total of 198 Labour MPs.

This debacle shows the real state of class relations, not the fable promoted by the RMT. It could not be otherwise under conditions in which the Labour Party is in lockstep with the Johnson government over its warmongering against Russia and support for ending all the COVID-19 emergency measures to safeguard the profits of the corporations. The real relationship of Corbyn to workers in struggle is that he cannot even bring himself to condemn the strike-breaking operation organised by the Labour-led local authority in Coventry, which is backed by the openly Thatcherite Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, against refuse drivers fighting for a pay increase.

Ending the sacrifice of workers' lives and livelihoods for corporate profits requires the formation of rank-and-file committees to unify all rail cleaners, outsourced and in-house. It means forging links with train drivers, conductors, engineers and all grades against the unions' agreement to place the economic fallout of COVID on the backs of workers, after the social looting during the government's multi-billion bail-out of the private rail operators during the pandemic.



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