

“That money that they spend for war we need it, the people need it , they should spend it on us”

Churchill station and train cleaners hold second strike across London and southeast England

Danny Knightly
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Hundreds of rail cleaners staged a 48-hour strike in London and across the southeast of England last Saturday and Sunday. The cleaners are in dispute with outsourcing firm, Churchill Group, fighting for improved pay and conditions.

They are contracted to provide cleaning services for train operators Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern, Southeastern, Eurostar and HS1. 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. A survey conducted by the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) found that 61 percent of the workers reported they struggle to get by.

Churchill made profits of £39 million in 2020 but has made no offer to increase the pay of employees.

In February, around a thousand cleaners, members of the RMT, voted unanimously in two ballots to strike for £15 an hour pay and the sick pay and travel entitlement denied them as outsourced workers. They are seeking to be direct employees of the railway companies whose trains they clean.

The workers held their first strike over 24 hours on February 7.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to pickets outside London's St Pancras station. Names have been changed to protect against victimisation.

Gloria said, “We are on strike for £15 an hour. We deserve our pay rise because we are on the front line in the pandemic. We put our lives and the lives of our family in danger.” Pointing to a fellow picket, Gloria said, “She was the first to have COVID, she was in hospital for a month. We need this resolved.”

Explaining the workers low pay, she said, “You can imagine £10.85 before taxes, how can you lead a proper life with £1,300 a month. Even when we do extra the company does not come to us and say thank you. Why not? This is our right, we do not stop when we are working, we need our rights!

“Churchill is always short of staff and there's always more areas to work in every day. They don't pay you for uniforms, for lunch, they pay for nothing. The company did not pay us for being off sick with COVID. One of us in hospital with COVID was never paid. During the pandemic we were only supplied with gloves, that is it, nothing else. No sanitiser, nothing, never.”

The workers are not paid enough to be able to ride the very trains that they ensure are clean enough for public use. Gloria explained the detrimental impact of employers not providing their cleaners with London Underground residential passes that would provide them with the quickest way to work: “I live in High Barnet, on the same line as King's Cross, but I have to take three buses to work every day, a journey of an hour and a half, because on my wages I cannot afford the tube fare.

“Look here,” she said, pointing to a large spillage at the entrance to St Pancras station. “For one hour no one has come to clean spillages. It is very dangerous for passengers at the entrance here, anyone can slip on it and break their legs. For us when we are in work, we have to rush and clean it.”

Strikers said they worked throughout the pandemic without being provided any special personal protective equipment (PPE) by the company, other than an occasional flimsy paper mask. As a result, many colleagues came down with the virus leading to staff shortages. This meant cleaners worked longer hours for the same money, even being called in on their holidays to go on shift.

Steve said, “We are paid £10.85 an hour. Inflation is going up. The price of everything is going up, food, clothes, the bills, everything. Gas, electricity is going up while we are still stuck on £10.85 an hour. Last time we got 10-15 pence extra. That is what the company are talking about again.”

Due to staff shortages, Steve explained, “Some of us do two or three people’s jobs, we are overloaded. Sometimes seven people do the whole of St Pancras station. We have the problem sometimes that we do not have a holiday. We have holidays, but we cannot take it. There are not only the pay rise, but holiday issues, like sick pay. We are Pay as You Go workers. If you work you get paid, if you do not work you do not get paid. I myself had coronavirus. I did not get paid anything either from the company or the government. We have our uniforms and gloves and that is it. Masks, apart from a few occasions, you pay for yourselves.

“Working in this station we should have at least a discount ticket, but nothing.”

Steve added, “That money that they spend for war, we need it, the people need it, they should spend it on us. For us it is very important. Why should they pay money for war? Yes there are humanity issues, money should be given to that, money should be spent on the people who need it. Everything in transport is together, so we should fight together.”

The RMT has called no further action in the Churchill dispute and are keeping the cleaners isolated from other workers throughout the rail industry facing the same attacks on their pay and conditions. To take their struggle forward, Churchill cleaners must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the RMT,

along with workers such as the Atalian Servest cleaners employed by Avanti West Coast trains, to wage a common offensive of all rail cleaners, whether outsourced or in-house. They must establish links with train drivers, conductors, engineers and all grades against the rail unions’ agreement to place the economic fallout of the pandemic on the backs of workers following the social looting during the government’s multi-billion bail-out of the rail operators.



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