

Balloting begins for biggest UK rail strikes in decades

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Thousands of rail workers attended a mass meeting Thursday night to launch a nationwide balloting campaign for strike action across Network Rail and the train operating companies. 40,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are being balloted over historic attacks on jobs, pay, terms and conditions as part of the Johnson government's Great British Railways re-privatisation project.

3,500 RMT members registered for Thursday's meeting—the first online mass meeting in the union's history, and its largest in decades. Thousands more listened via Facebook livestream. The turnout demonstrated workers' determination to fight. Balloting opens this week and closes on May 24.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch outlined plans by the Johnson government's Department for Transport (DfT) and the rail employers for “a generalised attack across all train operating companies and Network Rail”. The railways employ more than 240,000 people, including 42,000 Network Rail infrastructure workers.

The current dispute involves 41,000 members of the RMT across Network Rail and 17 train operating companies including, Chiltern Railways, Cross Country Trains, Greater Anglia, LNER, East Midlands Railway, c2c, Great Western Railway, Northern Trains, South Eastern Railway, South Western Railway, Island Line, GTR (including Gatwick Express), TransPennine Express, Avanti West Coast, West Midlands Train.

Lynch said the DfT had “thrown down the gauntlet” with a two-year pay freeze, massive job cuts, changes to working practices, terms and conditions, and attacks on the railway pension scheme, hugely increasing contributions and scaling back benefits.

The cuts include:

- £2 billion in permanent consolidated cuts across the railways, £600 million of this to be achieved

through “workforce reforms”

- Mass closure of ticketing offices
- Making Sunday part of the normal working week without compensation; scrapping current rostering principles, forcing all staff to work unsociable hours
- Stripping out jobs from station and retail grades, control rooms and catering services
- Multi-functionality between all station grades, including dispatch, gateline customer service, passenger assistance, security and revenue protection, retail and control
- Accelerated introduction of digital technologies and remote monitoring to undermine conditions and safety
- New technologies used as a pretext for Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains, with guards and conductors removed from operational and safety-critical role to onboard customer service
- £400 million in cash savings across Network Rail through “workforce reforms”
- £100 million in cuts to Network Rail's maintenance section with a shift to “risk based maintenance” and removal of 2,500 jobs.
- Network Rail operators will be replaced by roving “assistant technicians”, allocated to no specific discipline, team or route, paid as little as £21,000 a year, rostered individually and using their own vehicles to travel to job sites
- De-skilling of signallers and controllers (including use of drones to replace physical inspections) and authority of signallers to be overridden by management grade controllers

The Johnson government's agenda was spelled out in a White Paper last May by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps and former British Airways CEO Keith Williams, launching Great British Railways. Seizing on

the collapse of the TOC private franchise model during the pandemic, the Tories have unveiled a new model of privatisation managed by GB Railways. It will oversee a profit bonanza for transport corporations and other financial parasites.

“Our response has been certain and true,” Lynch declared, “The time is now on us. We have no choice but to launch a massive fightback”. But his report was shot through with duplicity. Lynch stated that the pandemic had been used as a smokescreen for huge cuts, but was silent on the RMT’s participation, alongside rail unions ASLEF, Unite, TSSA and GMB, in the Johnson government’s Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG).

Johnson and Shapps initiated the RIRG in December 2020, uniting the private rail operators, Network Rail executives and unions to restructure the railways. On January 13, 2021 the RMT signed up to its confidential “terms of reference” including plans to enforce massive cost savings, jobs cuts, attacks on conditions and the slashing of pensions. Lynch made just two passing references to the RIRG in his speech but was silent on the RMT’s participation in this corporatist body.

While paying lip service to rail nationalisation, the RMT advances no challenge to the re-privatisation agenda of the Johnson government. In the mid-1990s the RMT and other rail unions betrayed the fight against privatisation, claiming a Labour government would reverse the Tories’ move. But Blair and his fellow Thatcherites completed the rail sell-off begun under Tory minister Sir Malcolm Rifkind, and the RMT established a loyal partnership with the private TOCs, even as they looted billions, including £8.7 billion in dividend payments to shareholders since 1996.

During the pandemic, this looting operation has been expanded. Emergency Measures Agreements (between March and September 2020) saw the TOCs pocket £98 million in taxpayer funded “management fees”. These were succeeded by Emergency Measures Recovery Agreements, expiring this month, with handouts of £231 million. National Contracts, running for five years, will begin this month, with TOCs set to receive £626 million. The Johnson government also covered the leasing payments of the rolling stock companies (which own the trains), allowing them to gift £950 million to shareholders in 2020.

GB Railways is socialism for the rich, with the

government acting as guarantor against any future losses to private TOCs. It will be modelled on Transport for London, with funding dependent on meeting a moving feast of efficiency targets, creating a relentless pressure to boost productivity and downgrade safety.

Lynch outlined the RMT’s demands: an end to the pay freeze, no compulsory redundancies, and an assurance there will be no detrimental changes to work practices and terms and conditions. But the Johnson government will make no such assurances. Its reforms, spelled out in the White Paper and in months of discussions at the RIRG, are a declaration of war against the working class.

The RMT demands no compulsory redundancies, knowing that thousands of jobs will be permanently destroyed through voluntary redundancies, retirement, and natural attrition. According to the RMT’s own estimate, 2,500 jobs have already been axed in recent months via the government’s Voluntary Severance Scheme.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the widest mobilisation to return a “yes” vote for industrial action, but the dispute must not be left in the hands of the RMT. Rail workers must inscribe on their banner the fight for nationalisation of the railways under workers’ control. The train operating companies must be placed under public ownership and their profits seized to improve conditions and pay, expand the rail system and make fares affordable.

Lynch declared Thursday, “we cannot rely on others”. But success depends on a unified movement. On the London Underground, the RMT and ASLEF are sitting on massive strike votes by their members, refusing to organise a joint offensive to defeat the Johnson government’s plans being enforced by Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan. Rank-and-file strike committees should be elected at every station and depot to turn out and win support across the railways and among transport workers in the UK and across Europe, who are facing the same attacks.



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