

UK rail workers vote overwhelmingly for strike action

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Rail workers at 15 train operating companies and Network Rail infrastructure have voted for industrial action in defence of jobs, pay and conditions.

Around 40,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) were balloted, with 89 percent voting to strike off a participation rate of 71 percent. Guards, platform and ticketing staff, track maintenance workers and signal crews were among those balloted.

Rail workers face a historic assault on jobs, terms and conditions, with £2.5 billion in cuts being rolled out. 2,500 jobs have already been axed through a “voluntary” severance scheme, with thousands more slated for destruction as the Johnson government proceeds with its plans for Great British Railways.

Despite an unambiguous strike vote by rail workers—the biggest since the railways were privatised in 1994—the RMT has once again handed the political initiative to the government, appealing for negotiations.

In a statement issued Tuesday night, the RMT announced, “The union will now be demanding urgent talks with Network Rail and the 15 train operating companies that were balloted to find a negotiated settlement to the dispute over pay, jobs and safety.”

Mick Lynch, RMT General Secretary, declared, “we sincerely hope ministers will encourage the employers to return to the negotiating table and hammer out a reasonable settlement with the RMT.” Handed a mandate to set strike dates, the RMT’s National Executive Committee (NEC) has postponed any decision on limited strike action until its next meeting on May 31.

The RMT is using the strike vote as a bargaining chip, with the stated aim of pressuring the government and employers to resume their collaboration with rail unions. The NEC announced, “We note that prior to the

ballot there were regular meetings at an industry-wide level, therefore we call for the convening of an industry-wide forum of the employers, Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG—the employers’ umbrella group), Department for Transport and the rail trade unions to address the issues in this dispute.”

This must serve as a sharp warning to rail workers. The RIRG was initiated by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps in December 2020 to begin sweeping pro-market restructuring. Seizing on the collapse of fare revenues during the pandemic, the government unveiled a massive program of “efficiencies” as a prelude to re-privatising rail companies taken back into state ownership in 2020.

The RMT, ASLEF, Unite and TSSA joined the RIRG, signing up to its Enabling Framework Agreement that committed “to address efficiency and cost savings” as part of industry-wide plans by the Tory government to “rebuild and modernise” the railways.

Speaking to the *Mirror* following Tuesday’s results, amid newspaper headlines warning of a national strike, Lynch declared, “This is a regular industrial dispute. It’s not one with a political agenda. The only political agenda that’s been put there is by this government. And their agenda is to keep people low paid and impoverished to deliver austerity.”

Lynch’s statement confirms the RMT will mount no political fight against the Johnson government’s plans. Indeed, the RMT’s ballot of rail workers made no mention of GB Railways, despite its role in spearheading the government’s privatisation agenda.

While Lynch declares the RMT has no political agenda, the Johnson government is making no secret of its own plans. Over the weekend, Shapps warned his government would legislate to ban rail strikes unless minimum service levels are maintained. He told the

Sunday Telegraph, “If they really got to that point then minimum service levels would be a way to work towards protecting those freight routes and those sorts of things.”

The Tories’ pledge to ban rail strikes is modelled on Spain’s “essential services” anti-strike legislation that was inherited from Franco’s fascist dictatorship.

With inflation at its highest level in 40 years, the British ruling class has responded nervously to the prospect of a national rail strike. Dozens of newspaper articles and editorials have warned such strikes must be prevented at all costs, pointing to the already perilous supply chain crisis. The *Telegraph*, *Times* and *Financial Times* have all invoked the precedent of the 1926 General Strike.

TSSA union General Secretary Manuel Cortes has been widely quoted, asserting, “The disruption will be unparalleled. I don’t think we will have seen anything like it since the 1926 General Strike. That’s the last time the three unions came out together. And we will co-ordinate our action. It’ll be a summer of discontent.”

The British General Strike of 1926 encompassed 1.5 million workers who came out in support of the miners’ fight against pay cuts and longer hours. It assumed an insurrectionary character, threatening capitalist rule in Britain but was betrayed by the Trades Union Congress General Council which called off the strike after nine days. The general strike took place less than 10 years after the Russian Revolution and was led by socialists. But the Communist Party under the political direction of Joseph Stalin played a critical role in the strike’s defeat by promoting illusions in the “left” union leaders who strangled the strike.

With millions of workers struggling to survive, the Tory and “liberal” press are right to fear the emergence of a unified mass movement of the working class. But almost a century after the 1926 strike, the idea that Cortes, Lynch and company would organise such an offensive is laughable. Heading corporatist organisations wholly integrated into the structures of management and the state, these well-paid functionaries are implacable opponents of the working class. A general strike will only develop in political opposition to the trade unions and through an organisational break from them.

While Lynch claims to have “no political agenda”,

the RMT is suppressing rail workers’ opposition and channelling it behind the Labour Party. On the London Underground, Lynch has promoted Labour as an ally of rail workers, inviting its MPs to speak at rallies and calling on Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan to “decide which side you’re on”. Khan is implementing £400 million worth of cuts on behalf of the Tories and has denounced strikes on the London Underground.

Labour’s support for the Tory government’s rail agenda is an open secret. During last year’s House of Commons debate on the GB Railways white paper, Shapps thanked Labour MPs for their “tacit support” and “partial welcome” of the government’s proposals.

The RMT is calling for an end to the pay freeze, a ban on compulsory redundancies, and a commitment that “no detrimental changes will be made to working practices and/or terms and conditions”. But such commitments are incompatible with Johnson’s GB Railways project, which is premised on the evisceration of safety, jobs, wages, conditions and pensions.

As the government proceeds with its plans, including the establishment of a GB Railways Transition Team headed by Network Rail boss Andrew Haines, the RMT’s overriding concern is to retain their corporatist partnership with the government and rail employers. Hence their central demand for negotiations via the RIRG.

No faith can be placed in the RMT et al. Rank-and-file strike committees must be established as every depot and workplace to take control of the dispute. Such committees can win mass support from workers across the UK and worldwide who are protesting rampant inflation and austerity. While capitalist governments claim there is “no money” for transport, health, education and other necessities, the billionaires’ wealth hits record highs and billions are funnelled into NATO’s proxy war against Russia. The only answer to the anarchy and irrationality of the capitalist profit system is the struggle of the working class for socialism.



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