

UK: Rail strike at TransPennine Express continues over pay-parity and conditions

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UK rail conductors working for TransPennine Express (TPE) are continuing their Sunday walkouts begun February 13 over pay. The 270 workers plan to continue their strikes this coming Saturday and Sunday over the Queen's Jubilee long weekend.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members voted 85 percent to strike for an end to the pay gap between themselves and their colleagues at sister company Northern Trains. With the introduction of new technology to scan tickets, conductors (also known as guards) at Northern are paid 2 pence a scan—a payment denied to TPE conductors.

Among the attacks are changes to pay rates so Sunday would be considered part of the normal work week. At TPE, conductors want an enhanced flat payment of £250 and £275 for Rest Day Working and Sunday working restored.

TPE is owned by multi-national FirstGroup, a British transport company headquartered in Aberdeen, Scotland that includes rail and bus services across the UK and Ireland. Its rail franchises in the UK include Avanti West Coast, Great Western Railway, and SouthWestern railway.

FirstGroup runs the London Tramlink network on behalf of Transport for London, as well as being the largest bus operator in the UK.

TPE operates rail routes to and through Manchester, linking major towns and cities in the north of England such as Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds, York, Hull, Scarborough, Middlesborough, Newcastle, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

WSWS reporters spoke to guards on 24-hour strike manning a picket line outside Manchester Piccadilly railway station. They explained the reasons for their strike and discussed conditions at TPE and the cost-of-living crisis.

Reg explained, "We are on strike over the use of technology. We do the same job with the same equipment as our sister company in the north, but they get 2p a ticket more.

"We are being pushed to the limit. I work 10 or 11 hours a shift plus travelling time. The company intrudes into family life. My overall pay is lower than it was 15 years ago,

because of bonuses going. Our operator, however, made £100 million in a year."

Regarding the recent national rail strike vote over pay, jobs and conditions that will be ripped up as part of the Johnson government's Great British Railways privatisation agenda, Reg said, "The safety of the public is under attack. People who care about safety are being removed. They want people on zero hours contracts."

"Our shift patterns have got worse," Harry continued, "They are slowly stripping away everything. We already have drivers opening doors instead of conductors. They're dragging us backwards.

"It's all about profits over safety. We're going back to Victorian times. The governor of the Bank of England said no to pay rises. It's easy for someone like that, so out of touch. If you've got no money, the square root of nothing is nothing."

Regarding the cost-of-living crisis that is being intensified by the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, Harry said, "Putin was provoked into it by America."

"To fight the Tories [Conservatives], you have to fight the Tories in the Labour Party," he explained. "There's no real alternative to the Tories at the moment. But the power is with the people, we are the majority, if we are organised."

TPE bosses have responded intransigently to the conductors' fight, organising with other train operators to accept tickets marked "AP TPE ONLY" or "TPE ONLY," as well as flexible ones. Yet the RMT has announced no solidarity action to undermine this blatant strike breaking.

A guard from Northern Trains joined TPE workers on the picket line on Sunday, explaining his reasons for showing solidarity: "We were emergency workers during the pandemic. We've not had a pay rise for three years, but the companies have loads of money.

"Since the pandemic and the take-over by the government, they're running services down, and blaming it all on the staff.

"Some half-hour services are now every hour. To get people on transport you need frequent services. Is it

intentional to run services down? Piccadilly have lost 46 conductors. If you are a family person, you want Sundays off but if they can't cover it, you have to work."

Another guard, Frank, also complained about services being run down, "Manchester to Hull didn't have a service for seven hours one day. Dead right I want a national strike. 40,000 people [who voted for strike action on the rail network] are pissed off with this lot.

"There's a list of booking offices that will be closed. You're talking thousands of jobs. There are secret talks about First Bus selling out to an American company. We came out every day during the pandemic, risking our lives and our families' lives. In October TPE shat on us."

Barry, another TPE guard, said, "We're on strike because the cost of living is atrocious. We're not asking for the world. The money [chancellor Rishi] Sunak is giving to help with energy costs is not going to put on the kettle.

"It's not just about wages, it's about terms and conditions. We all want a national strike."

According to BusinessLive, TPE reported profits of £72.1 million for the 12 month period ending March 31, 2021. While the company suffered losses of £3.5 million due to lost passenger revenue during the pandemic, the government stumped up a revenue subsidy from the Department for Transport of £325 million.

Amidst the soaring profits of transport companies, passengers are also losing out. On March 1, train fares in England and Wales rose by up to 3.8 percent.

Workers on the railways face a root and branch restructuring and reprivatisation, including £2.5 billion in cuts, as part of the planned Great British Railways. Thousands of jobs are threatened, along with pay, pensions, and conditions.

Established roles that require essential skills and training, including in relation to health and safety, will be eviscerated. Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains are part of this agenda. DOO means guards will no longer perform operational and safety critical roles, with thousands of jobs at stake.

Since 2016, rail workers have conducted an ongoing struggle against DOO. Merseyrail guards have recently voted down a company proposal brought to them by the RMT to remove conductors from train cabs and force drivers to open and close doors. Drivers at Merseyrail have previously honoured picket lines by guards, showing the depth of feeling on the issue.

The RMT has sought to wear down this determined resistance, using divisive tactics and securing deals on a company-by-company basis which have watered down conductors' safety-critical role. Prior to strikes beginning in 2016, large swathes of UK trains were already DOO.

In spring 2021, the union agreed to remove door

operations from guards at South Western Railway, after a bitter four year fight. The RMT claimed there was no option after the company ordered 90 new trains designed to work without a guard.

At Scotrail in 2016, the RMT declared victory after sealing an agreement whereby drivers would open doors and guards close them, a precursor to removing door operations from guards altogether. It prevented a unified offensive of Scotrail with striking conductors at Southern Trains facing a scabbing operation.

At West Midlands Trains in the winter of 2019, the RMT settled a deal whereby the driver opens doors, and the conductor closes them. The union's deal was a slap in the face after ASLEF drivers had honoured pickets by conductors, thwarting the company's strikebreaking operations.

Both the RMT and train drivers' union ASLEF have opposed unified national strike action to prevent the introduction of DOO, negotiating agreements that paved the way for its introduction. Their collusion has encouraged a renewed attack under GB Railways to remove guards from trains altogether. RMT leader Mick Lynch, at a mass meeting of RMT members in April, revealed that full DOO was back on the table.

The RMT's response to last week's resounding nationwide strike vote by guards, platform and ticketing staff and Network Rail employees was to plead with rail company executives to return to the negotiating table and revive collaboration via the government's Rail Industry Recovery Group. The fight at TransPennine Express must be taken forward as part of a political and industrial offensive to defeat the government's GB Railways agenda and unite every section of the working class in the fight for socialism, placing the major transport companies under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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