

RMT union targeted as “Putin’s stooges” following UK national rail strike vote

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Britain’s right-wing press has renewed its witch-hunt against the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), declaring its officials are acting as Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “useful idiots” as they “plot a summer of mayhem on our railways”.

Following last week’s strike vote by nearly 40,000 rail workers, the media witch-hunt is a pre-emptive attack. Its purpose is to justify state repression against rail workers and cast any national rail strike as an act of treason. Anti-Russia war hysteria is being pressed into service to bolster plans by the Johnson government to ban strikes on the railways unless “minimum service” levels are met.

The sinister campaign, led by Rupert Murdoch’s *Times*, *Sun*, and the *Daily Mail*, seeks to brand strikes by tens of thousands of rail workers as the brainchild of Russian agents. The RMT is described as an “extremist union” run by a “far left cabal” that “is supporting Putin’s murderous adventures in Ukraine”.

This press campaign is based on a mountain of lies.

The *Times*’s contribution was an article headlined, “RMT railmen stick up for Kremlin”. It named RMT officials Brendan Kelly, Steve Skelly, Eddie Dempsey and Alex Gordon, along with former official Steve Hedley, accusing them of spouting “Kremlin propaganda”.

Times reporters Ben Ellery and Charlie Parker presented their revelations against Kelly (an RMT regional organiser), based on a podcast interview he did with *Bristol Cable* on March 24.

The *Times* depicts Kelly as a Russian patsy for having “repeated Kremlin claims that the Ukrainian government is allied with fascist forces”. They cite Kelly’s statement that “some of the left have campaigned on this issue... not necessarily in favour of Putin but [against] the use of fascist forces against the population.”

In March, Kelly had told *Bristol Cable*’s Neil Maggs, “The Ukrainian government is not fascist, but what they have done is unleash, or been prepared to unleash, some of these fascist groups to become embedded within state forces.”

Kelly’s statements aroused apoplexy at the *Times* because they contradict the barrage of lies and propaganda by NATO, the United States and Britain used to justify the largest military intervention in Europe since World War II. Behind its pious claims about “defending Ukrainian sovereignty”, the US and its NATO allies have provided political, financial and military backing to a network of fascist organisations serving as shock-troops in Ukraine, laying the ground for war and regime change against Russia.

The Azov Battalion was founded in May 2014 by Andriy Parubiy, co-founder of the neo-Nazi Svoboda Party. Azov’s commander is Andriy Biletsky, who has pledged to “lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade... against the Semite-led Untermenschen.” The Azov Battalion’s uniforms bear the Nazi Wolfsangel insignia used by

German Wehrmacht and SS units that carried out genocide against Ukrainian and Polish Jews during Hitler’s War of Annihilation against the Soviet Union.

The *Times* has a record of whitewashing this organisation of fascist thugs. On Monday it offered the following extraordinary headline: “Azov battalion drops neo-Nazi symbol exploited by Russian propagandists”. Its report notes blandly that the Nazi insignia, “used by the battalion since 2014”, has been replaced because “it helped perpetuate Russian propaganda about Ukraine being in the grip of far-right nationalism”!

Concealing the fascist pedigree of its Ukrainian allies has been a top priority for the US and Britain, hell bent on depicting their militarist rampage as a “war for democracy”. At the start of March, Britain, the US and EU powers shut down Russian state broadcaster RT, while YouTube has banned video content from separatist groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, home to a majority Russian-speaking population which voted to secede from Ukraine in 2014. YouTube’s purge removed 70,000 videos and 9,000 channels.

The *Times*’ attempt to portray Kelly as Putin’s stooge is contradicted in their own article, with its reporters conceding that “Kelly did describe Russia as a ‘gangster capitalist state run by Putin’ and said he was not a supporter of the Russian invasion”.

Such clear statements are not enough for Britain’s anti-Russia Torquemadas. Asked by Maggs whether he supported NATO or Russia in the current war, Kelly responded, “Dealing with Putin is the role of the Russian people”. The *Times* is outraged by this suggestion, and by Kelly’s criticism of NATO for “putting a gun on their [Russia’s] borders” and for saying that NATO’s leaders “would’ve been aware of the risky world they were creating by doing that”.

To answer Kelly, the *Times* cites James Nixey, director of the Russia-Eurasia programme at Chatham House, Britain’s leading foreign policy think-tank. He responds, “It’s so pathetic and grotesque I just don’t know where to start. As it’s not a sensible comment, I don’t have a sensible reply.”

Dr Ben Noble, associate professor of Russian politics at University College London, fares little better, offering, “It may well be that the Kremlin is using these people as ‘useful idiots,’ that is, as unwitting conduits for propaganda.” As with Nixey, not a single fact is proffered to refute what is an open secret: that Britain and its NATO allies are courting neo-Nazis.

Depicting fascists as freedom fighters requires that history be re-written. The crimes committed by the Azov Battalion’s fascist forbears, such as the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), must be suppressed, while the memory of Nazism’s 27 million Soviet victims must be expunged.

On May 27, the *Daily Mail* mounted an attack on leader Steve Hedley along these lines. Under the headline, “EXPOSED: The bosses of Britain’s most extremist trade union and their rabid sympathies for Russian dictator Vladimir Putin,” reporter Guy Adams describes a picket on the London Underground, “just four days after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

“And the most unusual thing about the RMT boss who is running it can be found on his raincoat. Not far from his RMT armband and a couple of socialist pin-badges, Hedley is wearing a striking black-and-orange ribbon. To those in the know, which might include anyone who follows Soviet or Baltic politics, it’s a Ribbon of St George.”

Adams explains the ribbon “is banned in Ukraine and many Baltic states, where it is regarded as an ugly symbol of Russian military aggression.” He quotes Canadian “analyst” Michael MacKay, (a member of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress whose history and activities the WSWS has comprehensively exposed), describing it as “an anti-Ukrainian hate symbol... as deeply offensive as the swastika.”

MacKay’s statement is obscene. In the context of World War II, the Ribbon of St George appeared on medals awarded to Soviet military veterans who helped defeat Nazism. Hitler’s War of Annihilation against the Soviet Union was aimed at the destruction of “Judeo Bolshevism,” i.e., the physical destruction of Marxism and European Jewry. Hitler sought to subjugate the USSR and transform its territories into colonies of the Third Reich. Central to this perspective was the Nazi’s “Final Solution,” leading to the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust.

To liken the St George’s Ribbon to the swastika is historical revisionism aimed at rehabilitating fascism. But the comparison befits a newspaper known by British workers in the 1930s as the *Daily Heil* due to its backing for Nazism and Sir Oswald Mosley’s blackshirts.

The Socialist Equality Party, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, has fundamental differences with the RMT’s leadership over the war in Ukraine. Many of the union’s leaders are past or present members of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, and they reflect its nationalist politics. Dempsey, for example, found himself supporting pro-Russian separatist leaders such as Aleksey Mozgovoy, founder of the Prizrak Brigade. Mozgovoy, who was killed in a roadside ambush in 2015, enjoyed links with leading Russian opposition politicians, including Sergey Mironov, former Chairman of the Russian parliament’s upper house and founder of the nationalist Russian Party of Life.

Despite our unbridgeable differences with the RMT, we unequivocally defend it against Britain’s right-wing press. The British ruling class, up to its neck in filthy intrigue in Ukraine—and with the blood of one million Iraqis and Afghans still on its hands—is in no position to lecture on political morality. It is a measure of the putrefaction of British democracy that the attacks on Britain’s largest rail union are based on a defence of Ukrainian fascists, the political heirs of Stepan Bandera, Andriy Melnyk and other criminal accomplices of Hitler.

However, our defence of the RMT cedes no ground to its claims to represent a militant and left-wing opposition for rail workers. The RMT cannot be entrusted with either the defence of rail workers’ jobs and conditions, or with waging a fight against war. For that, an independent class programme is needed, grounded in a socialist and internationalist perspective.

This means rejecting any support for NATO intervention in Ukraine and opposing Britain’s role as attack dog in a proxy war against

Russia. The RMT threatens World War III. The working class must oppose Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has facilitated NATO’s war plans by providing the long-sought trigger for intervention while driving a wedge between the Russian and Ukrainian working class. The only viable strategy for opposing the war is one grounded on unity of the Russian, Ukrainian and international working class in the struggle against capitalism.

War and the class struggle are inextricably linked. Britain is pouring billions in weapons and military support into Ukraine. The working class will foot the bill through savage austerity, including the gutting of the National Health Service, transport and infrastructure, social care, public education and welfare. NATO’s warmongering against Russia, including its imposition of sanctions, is also fuelling a global inflationary crisis, plunging millions into hardship, poverty and hunger.

Above all, the ruling class fears an eruption of the class struggle. Its right-wing press attacks on the RMT are aimed against thousands of rail workers who have signalled their readiness to fight.

On Sunday, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch appeared on *Sky News*. With the Johnson government wracked by crisis and powerful sections of the working class coming into battle, including on the London Underground, Royal Mail and British Telecom, Lynch described the fight on the railways as a “defensive dispute.” He told Sophy Ridge, “they have put their tanks on our lawn. We’re not threatening them, they’re threatening our people.”

Lynch was alluding to the words of Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who in 1969, faced with a growing wave of strikes, demanded of trade union leader Hugh Scanlon, “Get your tanks off my lawn.” More than half a century later, the trade unions have become corporatist partners of the employers and the state. They offer no such threat.

On Tuesday, the RMT’s National Executive Committee announced they were shelving strikes and re-entering talks with the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG). This corporatist body, uniting rail unions and employers, was established by the Johnson government during the pandemic, tasked with drawing up plans for the greatest assault on jobs, conditions and pensions in decades, part of the Tories’ Great British Railways privatisation bonanza.

Britain’s ruling class is using NATO’s war in Ukraine as a battering ram, demanding national unity against the class struggle. This only shows that the fight against imperialist war abroad and the defence of the working class at home, are one and the same. This fight must be waged in unity with the international working class in the struggle for socialism.



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