

# ScotRail train drivers reject pay cut negotiated by Aslef trade union

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The Aslef union has again stalled industrial action by drivers at passenger train operating company ScotRail. On Monday, after resuming talks for a few hours, the union suddenly announced, “Talks have been adjourned until later in the week.” No reason was given for the delay, with the union declaring, “No further comment will be made until the talks are concluded.”

This was the response by Aslef to the vote by drivers last Wednesday to reject a well below inflation pay deal of 4.2 percent it negotiated with ScotRail. Putting forward the deal last week Scottish organiser Kevin Lindsay said, “Aslef entered these talks in good faith. We have negotiated a pay offer of 4.2%, a three-year no compulsory redundancy deal and a number of other improvements. These will now be put to our members for their consideration.”

Aslef’s disappearing act is designed to give ScotRail breathing space and to allow both parties to concoct a dirty deal to end the dispute.

Rail unions throughout Britain are clamping down on any joint offensive against the crisis ridden Conservative government. The drivers’ struggle is being sabotaged ahead of ScotRail members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) including guards, platform and ticketing staffed—being balloted for strikes over a derisory 2.2 percent pay offer. The RMT is likewise ensuring no joint action occurs. Have announced on May 20 that “The union will set out a timetable for the [ScotRail] ballot and any potential action in due course,” nothing has been heard of this in the more than two weeks that have elapsed.

Drivers and other railworkers in Scotland are being isolated by the unions from their brothers and sisters in the rest of the UK. It was only on May 25 that 40,000 RMT members voted to strike against an historic assault on jobs, terms and conditions in England and Wales, with almost 90 percent registering a Yes vote.

ScotRail workers were not among those balloted at 15 train operating companies and at track maintenance firm Network Rail, justified on the basis that the company is now under the control of the devolved Scottish National Party (SNP) government.

The re-nationalisation of a number of operators was forced on both the UK and the Scottish governments due to the failure and collapse of the private franchise system. Even prior to the pandemic, Abellio ScotRail was notorious for delays and cancellations, overcrowding, and extortionate rail fares. Transport Scotland sanctioned a 3.8 percent rise in fares this year, the largest in a decade, making the cost of annual season ticket for travel between Edinburgh and Glasgow a staggering £4,430.

ScotRail drivers have been engaged in a work-to-rule since May 15, in response to a derisory initial pay offer of 2.2 percent—a pay cut as inflation stands at a 40 year high of 9 percent CPI and 11.1 percent RPI.

Transport Scotland was forced to introduce an emergency timetable with around one-third of normal services axed and 700 fewer trains running between Monday and Saturday. On Sunday, when the timetable is heavily dependent on overtime and rest-day working, only 556 of the regular 1,088 services were scheduled and 80 of those were cancelled.

The scale of the disruption reflects the dysfunctional character of the investment starved UK rail network, which has been transformed into a state-subsidised cash cow for franchise operators since the privatisation of British Rail by the Conservative government from 1994. The ScotRail franchise, responsibility for which was devolved to the Scottish government in 2005, has been run by three different operators since it was privatised in 1997. It has now returned to government hands with a chronic shortage of drivers, conductors, ticket examiners and other roles.

The new pay offer of 4.2 percent is less than half the

rate of inflation and nowhere near the 10-11 percent demanded by drivers to keep pace with the surging cost of living. Moreover, the additional 2 percent pay increase is linked to enhanced shift flexibility, efficiency savings and the extension of the normal working week from six days to a seven-day work pattern by 2027.

A spokesperson for Transport Scotland, which runs the operator on behalf of the SNP government, said revealingly, “We are disappointed that ASLEF, having given due consideration to the terms they negotiated, have decided to reject the very good offer on the table, an offer which is in part self-funded through increased revenue and efficiencies.”

Aslef are fully preparing to make major concessions. Scottish union organiser Lindsay told the media June 3 that they “are close to reaching agreement” ahead of Monday’s just shelved negotiations with ScotRail. The existing deal could be made more palatable to drivers “using the money that’s already in this package,” Aslef added.

Aslef said that if a deal cannot be agreed, it could ballot members for a series “discontinuous” 24-hour strikes to begin in late summer. But the union’s real aim is to bury any prospect of industrial action at the first opportunity. Over the weekend Lindsay assured the employers that Aslef won’t put up a fight against any real-terms pay cut, stating, “We don’t want to go on strike. We have never been on strike in 20 years. We are desperate to negotiate a fair settlement. We just need ScotRail and the Scottish Government to get to a place that we can all settle on.”

The role of ASLEF, the RMT, Unite and the TSSA in wrecking an offensive by UK rail workers could not be clearer. In Scotland, drivers are divided from conductors and guards in separate disputes. In the rest of the UK, Aslef does nothing while the RMT sits on a mandate for industrial action and re-enters talks over huge funding cuts, and wage and job cuts with the Conservative government’s Rail Industrial Recovery Group (RIRG). Set up in response to the collapse of fare revenues during the pandemic, the RIRG is set on imposing a sweeping pro-market restructuring plan. This includes the loss of 2,500 maintenance jobs and £2.5 billion in funding cuts at Network Rail, which maintains the UK’s antiquated, dangerous rail infrastructure.

ScotRail chief, Joanne Maguire, spoke glowingly of the unions, which were “absolutely not awkward or difficult” and are helping the “bargaining relationship” at his company.

For its part, the SNP government presented the pay cut

as crucial to the success of rail nationalisation, Scotland’s economic revival from the pandemic and climate change targets. Minister for Transport Jenny Gilruth said of the disruption of the timetable, “We can do very little to take forward our vision for ScotRail, of course, one that’s largely shared with our trade union partners who campaigned for public ownership... so I do hope union members consider the current offer positively and they will see it as both fair and affordable and we can all get on and work together to make public ownership of Scotland’s railway a success.”

The claim that there is no money to pay workers a decent wage is a fraud. Hundreds of billions have been made available by the UK and devolved governments to insulate the profits of big business from pandemic losses, including a £1.4 billion bailout for Scotland’s private train operators. The resulting inflation of the stock market and billionaire wealth is a major driver of the cost-of-living crisis, fuelled by NATO’s proxy war against Russia.

The SNP administration, like the Johnson government, is imposing the costs of these policies on the working class. It is desperate to settle the train drivers dispute, fearing that it will have a knock-on effect on pay demands across the public sector where it is trying to impose pay limits of 2.2 percent. At the same time, billions in public spending cuts are being drawn up to address a £3.5 billion shortfall in the Scottish budget.

Despite all efforts of Britain’s ruling parties, the opposition Labour Party and the trade unions to suppress the class struggle, rail workers and other key sections are coming forward to oppose the onslaught on living standards—including strike ballots this summer across local government in Scotland. To succeed, these struggles must be taken out of the hands of the trade unions. Workers must form new democratic organisations, rank-and-file committees, to unite their struggles and mobilise the full social power of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme.



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