

UK rail strikes announced: workers demand action in “summer of discontent”

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union has announced that 50,000 of its members will strike on June 21, 23 and 25, bringing much of Britain’s rail network to a standstill.

On the first day of strikes, 40,000 workers from Network Rail and the train operating companies will be joined by 10,000 RMT members on the London Underground fighting plans by Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and the Johnson government to impose £400 million in cuts.

The planned rail strikes will be the largest since 1989, when a series of one-day stoppages ended with the National Union of Railwaymen (the RMT’s predecessor) accepting an 8.8 percent pay rise.

Around 40,000 rail workers were balloted last month by the RMT, with 89 percent voting to strike off a participation rate of 71 percent. On the London Underground, 94 percent of RMT members voted to strike. ASLEF members voted 99 percent to strike in a ballot that has since expired.

Rail workers are determined to take on the Johnson government. On May 31, the RMT announced it was entering talks via the Johnson government’s Rail Industry Recovery Group—a move that met widespread anger. It reversed its position yesterday, with General Secretary Mick Lynch declaring, “Our union will now embark on a sustained campaign of industrial action which will shut down the railway system.”

The national rail strikes are part of a broader movement as workers come into battle amid the biggest inflationary spiral in 40 years. In Italy, two general strikes took place in April and May, followed by a general strike in Belgium May 31. In Britain, British Airways ground staff are being balloted for strike action over restoration of a “temporary” 10 percent pay cut imposed during the pandemic. Tens of thousands of Royal Mail and BT workers will also vote on strike action for pay—BT’s first national strike ballot in 35 years. Waste collection workers, bus drivers, fuel workers and HGV

drivers are all in dispute.

Amid an acute government crisis and with social tensions at breaking point, the ruling class is fearful of the prospect of national rail strikes. “Summer of Misery” was the *Financial Times*’ description of the rail dispute “at the vanguard of a ‘summer of discontent’”. The *Express* declared that the prospect of rail and airport strikes “has thrown up concerns of a repeat of the 1978 ‘Winter of Discontent’...” It cited 89-year-old Sir Bernard Ingham, press secretary to former prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who warned, “There’s the dangerous situation in Ukraine, the economy is badly damaged by Covid”. Ingham resurrected his former boss’s branding of the miners as “the enemy within”.

The government’s response has been two-fold. Yesterday, Huw Merriman, chairman of the cross-parliamentary Transport Committee, demanded the government fulfil its manifesto pledge to ban strikes unless minimum service levels are maintained. At the same time, the *Observer* reported Sunday that senior rail figures had “looked on aghast as [Transport Secretary Grant] Shapps said ministers were considering limiting the right to strike – a move that inevitably inflamed unions. More thoughtful parts of government have been trying quietly to avoid conflict”.

Anti-strike legislation is doubtless being readied, but Shapps proceeded cautiously yesterday, criticising the RMT for “jumping the gun by announcing this when talks have only just begun.” Health Secretary Sajid Javid, facing down pay demands from 250,000 NHS workers, appealed to the RMT and industry bosses to resume negotiations. His call was echoed by the Rail Delivery Group (representing train operating companies) and Network Rail chiefs. Earlier today, PA news agency reported that “talks between Network Rail and the union are expected in the next few days.” In its strike announcement, the RMT decried “the inability of the rail employers to come to a negotiated settlement with RMT”.

The Tories are determined to implement plans for Great British Railways—an historic assault on the jobs, conditions

and pensions of all rail workers. GB Railways is portrayed as re-nationalisation but is Privatisation 2.0. The franchise model is being replaced, with transport giants including Arriva, Abellio and FirstGroup to receive guaranteed income and profits via GB Railways.

So far, at least five train companies have signed 5-year “transitional contracts” based on pledges that staff payrolls will be slashed through an overhaul of terms, conditions and grades. This includes plans to eliminate guards, downgrade driver training and impose labour flexibility.

Plans include £2 billion in permanent consolidated cuts across the railways and £600 million achieved through “workforce reforms” and the closure of ticketing offices. Sunday will become part of the normal working week without compensation, while rostering principles will be scrapped forcing all staff to work unsociable hours.

Thousands of jobs are targeted for destruction via “voluntary redundancy” and sackings, ushering in “multi-functionality” between all station grades, including dispatch, gateline customer service, passenger assistance, security, revenue protection, retail and control.

Network Rail is at the heart of these plans, with £400 million in cash savings marked through “workforce reforms”. This includes £100 million cuts to maintenance, eliminating 2,500 jobs. Planned preventive risk-based maintenance will end. Instead, roving “assistant technicians”, allocated to no specific discipline, team, or route, will be paid as little as £21,000 a year, rostered as required and using their own vehicles to travel to job sites.

De-skilling of signallers and controllers is envisaged, including using drones to replace physical inspections, and management grade controllers overriding the authority of experienced signallers. It is a recipe for disaster.

None of this is being opposed by the RMT and its silence is matched by rail unions ASLEF and TSSA. The RMT is portraying the current rail strikes as primarily over pay. Its demands are limited to an (unstated) pay rise, and a guarantee there will be no forced redundancies.

Rail workers are entering the third year of an unprecedented pay freeze, with RPI inflation already at 11 percent. But no fight over pay can be successful if Johnson’s plans for GB Railways are allowed to proceed.

Despite its militant rhetoric, the RMT has no intention of mobilising rail workers to defeat the Johnson government’s GB Railways agenda. Its objection is that rail bosses are proceeding without consultation, with its statement May 31 insisting that “any changes to structures, working practices, or conditions have to be agreed with our union, not imposed.”

The unions are working to divide rail workers and suppress demands for an all-out strike. Not a single joint

action has been organised on the London Underground, despite huge strike votes months ago by RMT and ASLEF members. On the national rail, ASLEF has not balloted drivers while the RMT makes no criticism in a de facto gentlemen’s agreement.

What is needed is the formation of rank-and-file committees that can cut across the sectional divisions upheld by the corporatist trade unions, uniting drivers, train guards, platform and Network Rail workers, forging links with workers already in struggle on the London Underground, and among the post, telecommunications and airline workers now coming into struggle.

To defeat Johnson’s GB Railways agenda, workers confront a political battle. Notwithstanding Shapps’s appeals for negotiation, the Tories will respond to a major national rail strike with the full force of the state, including anti-strike laws, organised scabbing by management personnel and a political witch-hunt. Their biggest asset is the Labour Party headed by Sir Keir Starmer. The Shapps-Williams GB Railways plan is largely modelled on Labour’s own proposals, while in London Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan is dutifully implementing Johnson’s cuts.

Against the government’s claims that there is “no money” to fund public transport, decent pay and pensions, workers must advance the demand for socialist measures, including the expropriation of the rail companies under workers’ control. Their billions must be used to fund a vast expansion of public transport, to uplift workers’ pay and conditions and make transport affordable and accessible for all.



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