

“We need to unite across all the rail companies. The union is not fighting for us.”

London rail workers speak out ahead of national strike

Our reporters
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Rail workers across London spoke to campaign teams from the World Socialist Web Site ahead of the largest national rail strike since 1989.

50,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union will strike on June 21, 23 and 25, against wage, job and pension cuts. The government is planning an historic attack on the industry under its “Great British Railways” scheme. RMT and Unite members on the London Underground and train drivers represented by the ASLEF union are also due to walk out.

Reporters found a widening demand for united strike action to confront this threat in transport and throughout the working class. The rail strikes are part of a broader movement of workers across the UK and internationally, driven by spiralling inflation and the impacts of the pandemic and NATO-Russia war in Ukraine.

Campaign teams distributed the statement “UK rail strikes announced: workers demand action in ‘summer of discontent’.” They discussed the necessity for workers to take the struggle into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees cutting across artificial divisions imposed by the unions and mounting a political fight against the Johnson government and its Labour Party partners.

All workers spoke anonymously for fear of victimisation.

London King's Cross

A member of train crew said, “The government are trying to put together this Great British Railways plan which is bad for workers. It is about cutting jobs and downsizing. I am worried that there are going to be a lot of job losses. The cost of living is going up, wages are not going up—that is what strike is about. I could have retired last year, but due to the cost of living I am still here working.”

One member of station staff commented, “We cannot survive on our wages; the wages are crap. We are on the lowest grade of pay it is a nightmare job.”

An Atolian Servest (LNER contractor) cleaner told our reporters, “We are represented by RMT but were not called to strike. Last time RMT called a cleaners’ strike they cancelled at the last minute and imposed inferior negotiated terms. Both the union and management are mistreating foreign workers who try to bring up their rights by saying they don’t understand them.”

“We are very low paid and wages are going downwards. We worked under COVID but were not paid extra. We are not given rail passes to travel to work. We are severely understaffed, with no organisation, no supervisor even. When the supervisor is there, he doesn’t help at all, and it would be much better if they had an extra cleaner instead.”

London Euston

At London Euston, a member of the ASLEF train drivers’ union explained, “Anything less than 10 percent is a pay cut. That is just to keep level with this year’s

inflation rate, and I am sure with all the other rises in costs it has got to the point where the entire population cannot afford to live in this country anymore. With 10 percent inflation, for the third year you're not getting a pay rise, when you look at it even a 9 percent pay increase will be a drop in wages. It is why such a high amount of people are voting for strike action because we are faced with a brick wall.

"I have worked for many years in the railway and the most severe changes have been in the last four years. The cancellations over the last period have not been because of strike action. People are leaving the industry. You cannot keep people working and working. Colleagues are doing thirteen days on, one day off. It is within safety limits but these limits are being pushed right to the edge every day. In the end people are burned out.

"If people's wages mean they cannot afford to buy the products the capitalist system produces it is all going to fall apart. Years ago, the working man could go to an industry, get a job, work for 40 to 45 years, pay into a pension, raise his kids, two weeks holiday at the seaside, run a little car and when he retired he had a decent pension, could be with grandkids and everyone turned up and had a pint at his funeral. Now most cannot even afford the pint."

Clapham Junction

A train dispatcher at Clapham Junction said, "I know managers who have to work two jobs to be able to make ends meet in order to live in London. We were on the front lines during COVID and we were given no compensation when the vast majority of staff caught COVID. There are differing pay scales for different stations. Platform workers are working almost every day because of staff shortages. They are not paid overtime; they have to claim that time back it causes an increase in the fatigue index as we are not getting rest. It increases the risk of accidents and reduces overall rail safety.

"We're losing out on annual leave due to shortages, not getting those days back, yet they want to cut more staff. Under capitalism there is no preparation, only when a crisis occurs will measures be taken to protect the population, like with COVID. There is still no system put in place to prevent future outbreaks, unlike in China with their lockdown policy.

"The railway companies are hiding the true extent of the cuts from workers and the travelling public. The unions are aiding them, making the strike all about pay, yet 20,000 jobs are going to be cut. Staff shortages mean the railways are unable to operate the safe service they promise. When the new 701 trains are brought in replacing the trains given to Southeastern rail, guards will be made obsolete and unable to resolve issues on trains, decreasing the safety of passengers. The train drivers' union ASLEF is dividing workers, bringing them out on individual strikes rather than all together."

A train conductor said, "The RMT does not put enough money in the strike fund to support workers on strikes and at risk of losing their pay. We need a new organisation and strategy to fight for workers' rights outside of the union. Companies are trying to get rid of the guards with the new 701 trains. The RMT is not strong enough to fight for workers. They are working with the government and with the rail companies to freeze workers' pay."

Another member of station staff explained, "Rail workers are on £21,000 plus £2,000 London living wage. I have to come in to work on Sundays for the overtime to make ends meet. However, under the new Great British Railways plans Sunday will be considered a normal day with no overtime. It will lead to more shortages and staff calling in sick, further reducing rail safety on top of the proposed 15,000 job cuts."

Commenting on the strikebreaking plans involving agency workers being organised by the Johnson government, another worker at Clapham Junction said, "Companies have been shifting more towards agencies so that if people strike, there are always more workers to bring in. I've never been part of the union. Unions sell out their members. They will not fight for workers' rights or wages. We need to unite across all the rail companies. The union is not fighting for us."



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