

“The unions work together with the managers”: UK rail workers speak out ahead of national strike

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters have been speaking to rail workers across the country ahead of next week’s planned national rail strike, distributing the article, “UK rail strikes announced: workers demand action in ‘summer of discontent’”.

Sheffield

Our reporters spoke with drivers at Sheffield station working for Northern Rail. On March 1, 2020, the private operator Arriva was stripped of the franchise it was due to run until 2025, with the government’s Operator of Last Resort taking control. The franchise had become a byword for train cancellations and delays, causing it to be dubbed “Northern Fail”.

A driver said, “This is a massively important strike. Everything is under attack: jobs, wages, terms and conditions.

“We worked throughout the pandemic and now, following the country coming out of the lockdown, to be told we will have no pay rise with this cost of living crisis, and that we are losing jobs, is a disgrace. This feels like another nail in the coffin.

“It would not surprise me if Arriva never even handed back the £9 billion it got for the franchise when the government took back control.”

Another worker explained, “I was not into politics until the government took Northern back under its control.

“The service is being set up to fail. They are not offering any overtime for Sundays so services are

cancelled. But they are also cancelling services when there are staff available. Me and a guard were going to take over a train but we were informed it would not be running. The announcement on the platform said it had been cancelled because of there was no staff. This is a service run by the government!

“The railways have been a cash cow for the private sector and now it’s happening again. It’s all to justify handing Northern back to the private sector.”

A third said, “I’ve worked for 30 years in the rail and since 2019 we’ve had no pay rise the longest period I can remember. Even after the financial crash in 2008 we still received wage rises of around 4 and 5 percent. A pay freeze for three years and this is with the record inflation we have now.

“They are cancelling services right, left and centre it’s a deliberate downgrading of the service and they are blaming drivers and staff. We should all get together and sock it to this government. This can’t go on, it’s unacceptable.”

London

A member of train crew in London told the WSW, “The government has told my boss who has told me we are not getting a pay rise for two years. If the RPI [inflation rate] is 11.1 percent, I think all of the NHS [National Health Service] workers, the railway workers, everyone, should get a pay rise. If we do not, how are you supposed to keep up with your bills? Inflation is far higher than wages.

“The company where I work, we only voted for action short of a strike. We did not reach the government’s requirement under the trade union laws of over 50 percent voting. We cannot go on strike with the other 12 train companies, but I will not be doing any overtime this month.

“Our pay has been going backwards. The last pay rises we had were 3 percent, then 2 percent, then 2 percent. The union recommended each deal as the best offer but I believe wages should always go upwards.

“[Prime Minister] Boris Johnson has put up national insurance. [Labour Party London Mayor] Sadiq Khan has put up council tax by 10 percent. It seems costs are going up by 10 percent but we are not getting a pay rise for two years. There is not much between Boris Johnson and Kier Starmer’s Labour Party. When I hear the Tory government say one thing, I want Labour to say the opposite, I want the choice, but Starmer just says ‘yes that’s a good idea’.

“From when I used to work in a bus garage as a bus conductor, Unite [trade union] are too close to management. You would think the bus drivers would be strong. They go to the union; the union does nothing. There is a new thing for the bus drivers, it is called the Bus Rank-and File Committee. They can put the union under pressure, demanding to know ‘why are you letting the company bring in new ideas to make more money, to make more millions?’

“In my company, ticket offices workers are in the TSSA union, we are in RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport union], and the drivers are in ASLEF so the bosses can divide everybody up and deal with different people at different times. If we get together we have strength in unity.”

Leeds

A cleaner at Leeds station told our reporters they had to work 11 hours at a time, four days a week. The pay is around £ 9.50 per hour, barely above the minimum wage. “The bosses want to cut our hours to eight hours a shift, and that would mean losing three hours of pay. I agree that the government are spending billions to arm Ukraine against Russia, while telling workers they have

to tighten their belts.”

John, an experienced rail worker, said, “I’ve been working on the railways for 30 years and I am only a few years away from retirement.

“I remember the way things used to be when I worked for British Rail prior to privatisation. This GBR [Great British Railways] plan is being put forward as nationalisation, but it’s not. The same companies are going to be there making a profit, with the government overseeing it. Nothing will get better for the travelling public, but it will be a lot worse for the staff.

“I feel sorry for the younger workers on the railways—they won’t get a decent pension or anything else. They will be left with pensions worth nothing, just like [1980s publishing baron Robert] Maxwell did to his employees.

“The unions are not defending us like they did in the past, they work together with the managers. The managers tell them, ‘Yes, you can have a pay rise, so long as you agree to cuts that add up to the same as the increase in pay.’ And the union goes along with it. This is the biggest strike since 1989, and we all voted in favour of it. But the union are only doing it because they have to.”



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