UK: RMT officials offer surrender to Tories on eve of national rail strikes, as Corbyn and McDonnell give their blessing

Chris Marsden
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Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) General Secretary Mick Lynch appealed for direct talks with the Conservative government June 15, in a begging letter to Transport Secretary Grant Shapps. Had Shapps accepted, there is no doubt that next week's planned strikes would have been called off as the RMT negotiated a rotten betrayal.

The letter was issued to coincide with a debate in parliament later that day. It called for an "urgent meeting" with Shapps and Chancellor Rishi Sunak "without any pre-conditions" to avert three days of strike action on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday by workers from infrastructure company Network Rail and 13 train operating companies.

Lynch added that through its participation in the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG) with the employers, "In effect in recent weeks the union has been negotiating with the government, but the government have not been in the room."

The RMT's request for talks "without preconditions" is tantamount to surrender. Its aim is to offer maximum room for manoeuvre, allowing the government to offer token concessions, such as an agreement for no compulsory redundancies and renewed pay talks, that would allow the union to suspend the strikes.

The letter follows Lynch's earlier response to Shapps' threat on June 13 to enact legislation allowing agency workers to be used as a scab strike-breaking force. Lynch insisted the government needed to "unshackle the rail operating companies so they can come to a negotiated settlement that can end this dispute."

The only thing that has so far prevented a sell-out by the RMT is that the Tories have rejected the union's entreaties. The RMT doesn't want to fight, whereas the Johnson government wants to take on rail workers, just as Thatcher took on the miners, using its victory as a battering ram against the entire working class.

In 1984-85, the miners were defeated due to the isolation of their dispute by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party. Today, Johnson and Shapps know that Lynch and company are opposed to any all-out mobilisation to defeat the government's Great British Railways privatisation agenda and will do nothing that threatens to bring down the government.

The same holds true of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his dwindling band of "left" Labour MPs whom the RMT have promoted as allies of rail workers in their struggle against the Tories. If anything, Corbyn and his ex-shadow chancellor John McDonnell stooped lower than Lynch in seeking an end to the planned strikes. The RMT's call for negotiations was a lifeline, allowing them to assume their natural role of peacemaker and opponents of the class struggle.

During the debate in parliament, Labour's benches were largely deserted, as many including Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer absented themselves.

Given their head, the Corbynites behaved despicably. Corbyn himself did not even mention the strike, speaking only vaguely of "the anger that many people who work in the rail industry feel… at being told basically to take a pay cut and face compulsory redundancies at a time when billions has been poured into the train operating companies…"

McDonnell's statements were more expansive and more damning. Taking note of Lynch's call for a meeting "without any preconditions," he appealed to Shapps, "We are trying to resolve this matter. Will he respond immediately to Mick Lynch, positively, that he will meet the union now?"

Such negotiations, he argued, were in the government's

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best interests, citing the willingness of the RMT to agree a sell-out. The RMT's "first demand is for no compulsory redundancies—compulsory is the key word. There has never been a time when the RMT has not negotiated job losses, but there has always been a principle that they should not be compulsory. I remember that Bob Crow never lost a dispute, and neither has Mick Lynch, because they are sensible about the nature of the disputes that they get into."

Tory Huw Merriman interrupted to say he was convinced by McDonnell, "who makes a very good point. It may well be, in return for giving way a little in saying, 'Okay, we'll sit down with you and then not strike,' that the RMT needs to hear that there will not be a need for compulsory redundancies, because the way the workforce works, voluntary redundancies should probably be taken up anyway and then that could be the natural progression."

This is precisely the function of voluntary redundancies, as the Tory *Daily Telegraph* boasted Tuesday. Via a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, it reported more than 2,949 applications for redundancy from managers were received last autumn by train operating companies and an additional 2,159 from Network Rail. Andrew Haines, chief executive of Network Rail, concluded, "We know there is huge latent demand within Network Rail for people to leave and move on… and it could be unlocked by the trades unions."

McDonnell was enthused by Merriman's support, waxing lyrical of his own role and that of the trade unions in betraying the working class. "The hon. Gentleman knows what these negotiations are like," McDonnell confided. "My background is the National Union of Mineworkers, then the TUC and so on—I have been a trade unionist for the last 50 years—and in every sort of negotiation, the key issue is just getting through that door. Once we get through that door and are face-to-face starting those negotiations off, anything can happen."

He warned that the Tories were making it impossible for the trade union bureaucracy to control their members. "I have been talking at various union conferences—I was at Unison yesterday and all the rest—and there is a concern that we are going back to the 1980s, and I saw what happened in the 1980s. My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who is here, was an active miner at the time, and I was a member of the [National Union of Mineworkers] head office.

"What happened then was that there was a government will to somehow take on the trade union movement, and we got described as the 'enemy within.' If anyone thinks it is to their advantage politically to start taking the RMT on as the enemy within in this situation, they are sorely mistaken, because it is not just about the RMT."

At union conferences, Tory threats of "minimal services, bans on overtime and all the rest" were "inflammatory when we are trying to get a negotiated settlement."

The Tories could provoke something no trade union leader wanted, a general upsurge of the working class. "Unite has 100 disputes taking place at the moment. The general secretary of Unison has for the first time—I have never heard this before—said to Unison members, 'Go back to your branches and prepare for action.' The PCS [civil servants union] is in dispute as well… I just think that Conservative Members should know that this is not the time for braying speeches; it is a time for consideration and an element of responsibility to be introduced into this debate."

McDonnell's message to the Tories was, "Talk to the RMT. Prevent a strike or you may open the floodgates!" Unfortunately for him, the Tories wanted none of it. The next day, Shapps made an inflammatory speech at a rail depot in Hornsey, north London, warning that rail workers could "strike themselves out of a job." The government would change the law as soon as this summer to let agency workers break strikes, close 1,000 ticket offices and make Sunday working compulsory. He would not negotiate with the RMT because "it would undermine the position of the employers…"

The working class is on a collision course with the Conservative government. To win, workers must make sure their fight is not sabotaged by the union bureaucrats. Powerful rank-and-file organisations must be built, controlled by the workers themselves, that can unite the emerging strikes feared by McDonnell and company and bring down the hated Johnson government. We urge rail workers to read the Socialist Equality Party's statement, "The British rail strike: Mobilise the entire working class against the Johnson government!"

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