

TUC unions make eleventh hour attempt to sabotage UK rail strikes

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At 9.00pm Sunday evening, the *Independent* reported a letter signed by the leaders of Britain's 14 biggest trade unions to Conservative government Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, urging last minute talks to prevent this week's planned rail strikes from going ahead.

The letter was an attempt to sabotage a strike that no trade union bureaucrat in the UK wants to take place. Amid weeks of bellicose statements by union leaders threatening action on behalf of their members, it confirmed that the only thing preventing a rotten sellout of rail workers is the refusal of the Johnson government to accept the unions' terms of surrender.

Just one day after the Trades Union Congress (TUC) held a demonstration in London attracting tens of thousands, pledged to opposing Tory austerity, soon-to-retire TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady stated, "Rather than fanning the flames of this dispute, the government should be working in good faith to find a negotiated settlement. They have the power to do this."

Along with O'Grady, the general secretaries of Unite, the GMB, Unison, the National Education Union and Communication Workers' Union—many of which are threatening strikes over the summer and autumn—wrote, "The trade union movement will never accept attempts to divide workers from one another.

"With household bills and prices skyrocketing, of course workers will seek to defend jobs, pay and conditions. The right to withdraw your labour is a fundamental British liberty."

But they then begged Shapps, "Our rail unions are seeking a negotiated settlement to this dispute, and we urge you to get round the table with unions and employers to help deliver a fair resolution."

The TUC argued that rail workers in Wales had already reached agreements with rail operators on pay

and job protections and that "meaningful negotiation" was taking place in Scotland. This same "opportunity has been blocked for other rail workers by ministers in Westminster, who insist on imposing cuts rather than negotiating a future for rail that benefits both rail travellers and staff."

As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) General Secretary Mick Lynch appealed June 15 directly to Shapps and Chancellor Rishi Sunak for an "urgent meeting... without any pre-conditions" to avert three days of strikes on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday by workers from infrastructure company Network Rail and 13 train operating companies.

This became the central appeal made during a parliamentary debate last Thursday, backed by Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Transport Louise Haigh for the party's right-wing leadership and by former leader Jeremy Corbyn and his main ally, former shadow chancellor John McDonnell.

On Sunday, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer delivered his own version of the same message, also accusing Shapps of not preventing a strike that Labour opposed. "Instead of spending their time this week around the negotiating table, they are designing attack ads. Instead of grown-up conversations to take the heat out of the situation, they are pouring petrol on the fire. Instead of bringing people together in the national interest, they are stoking division in their political interest."

In a separate letter to Shapps, Haigh insisted, "The only way to sort this out is for your government to stop boycotting the talks and get around the table. With just 24 hours to go, it's time to show some leadership to avoid the strike."

Shapps has rejected any talks with the RMT, stating, "This is a stunt at the 11th hour by the union, suddenly

coming forward and saying, ‘We need to negotiate with the government now,’” adding that the union was “gunning” for a strike.

On Sunday, Lynch responded desperately on Sky News, “What else are we to do? Are we to plead? Are we to beg? We want to bargain for our futures. We want to negotiate.”

If the trade union bureaucracy had its way, there would never be another strike in the UK, let alone the wave of industrial action now threatened. But the ability of the unions to police the class struggle on behalf of the major corporations has been severely undermined—not only by the fact that the Tories are offering no compromise they can sell to their members, but because the working class is also seeking a confrontation with the government and the employers. As Lynch told Sky News, this week’s strikes now seemed inevitable and other workers would ballot for strike action “because people can’t take it any more”.

But workers seeking a fightback cannot allow the trade unions to remain in charge of the struggles now on the agenda or they will demobilise and betray them.

The Socialist Equality Party is urging the construction of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the trade unions, that can break the bureaucracy’s stranglehold and put the working class in charge of its own destiny. We urge rail workers and everyone who wants to see the Johnson government brought down to contact the SEP today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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