

UK rail strikes begin this week: the working class needs its own strategy

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On Monday afternoon, Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) General Secretary Mick Lynch confirmed that national rail strikes involving 50,000 workers would go ahead this Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. He complained that the union had been given “no choice” because the Conservative government had “actively prevented a settlement” from being reached with the employers. “The dead hand of this Tory government is all over this dispute.”

Lynch is supposedly discovering what was apparent from the very beginning, that the Tories want a strike and to mobilise the full might of the state to inflict a defeat on railworkers and the entire working class. But whereas the Tories have been on war footing for weeks, the RMT, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the other unions have been offering terms of surrender at every possible opportunity. The last thing they want is the emergence of a wave of class struggle on a scale not seen for decades.

On Sunday night, the *Times* listed the following pay demands: the Public and Commercial Services Union representing 188,000 workers for 10 percent; the National Education Union representing 500,000 and NASWUT union representing 300,000 for 11-12 percent; Unite, Unison and the GMB representing 1.4 million local government workers for 11 percent; the Royal College of Nursing representing 500,000 for 16 percent and the British Medical Association representing 160,000 for 22 percent for junior doctors.

Not one of these bureaucracies, which have collectively presided over a decade of austerity and the worst pay stagnation in centuries, intends to fight seriously for these demands. They have yet to even ballot their members. But they are forced to speak in such terms due to the overwhelming sentiment among workers for a fight against the Johnson government to raise wages to offset the worst cost-of-living crisis in recent memory.

Other workers being balloted include 40,000 BT

workers by the Communication Workers Union, and 100,000 workers at Royal Mail; 16,000 British Airways workers and 500 Heathrow airport staff balloted by Unite; and the indefinite strike action being taken by Arriva bus workers in Yorkshire and Coventry refuse workers.

Chief Secretary to the Treasury Simon Clarke responded by attacking workers’ “unrealistic expectations” and telling them to prepare for cuts. The government is making public sector pay awards of 2-3 percent. Inflation is currently at 11.1 percent and rising.

All over the world, the same struggle is being fought out. General strikes have been launched in Greece, Italy and Belgium. A national transport strike took place in Italy last Friday against privatisation. Workers at the Ryanair will strike in Belgium and Portugal from June 24-26, France from June 25-26, Italy on June 25, and Spain on June 24-26, June 30 and July 1-2.

The UK rail strikes are a vital front in this expanding global counter-offensive by the international working class. To win, rail workers need a clear understanding of who they are fighting and who their allies are.

Johnson’s Tory government intends to strike a devastating first blow against the wave of strikes threatening to break out this year. Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng has presented plans, to be tabled this week and scheduled to come into force in mid-July, allowing agency staff to be brought in as scabs to replace striking workers. The government also wants to enact legislation making minimum service cover compulsory during strikes.

The trade unions have repeatedly warned the government that it risks provoking a social explosion that would leave the RMT and others unable to control the upsurge of the working class. They are urging a deepening of their corporatist partnership with the government in order to implement its attacks in a less inflammatory way.

This is epitomised by the RMT's pay demand of just 7.1 percent, four points below the current rate of inflation, justified on the spurious grounds that this was the rate of inflation when pay talks began in December. Whenever negotiations started, workers need to pay the bills at prices being charged *today* and to make up for the losses of previous pay freezes.

Similarly, the union insists only that there be no *compulsory* redundancies, while stressing their record on agreeing to thousands of so-called voluntary redundancies—imposed by exploiting the desperation of older workers.

The RMT already made clear that it was ready for one compromise after another. On June 15, Lynch sent a letter to Transport Secretary Grant Shapps and Chancellor Rishi Sunak asking for talks “without any preconditions”.

The full measure of the RMT's claims to represent a militant alternative was provided by Lynch's efforts during a press conference yesterday to politically rehabilitate Sir Keir Starmer and the Labour Party.

Starmer and “his team” must “ride the wave of resistance” in the working class. Labour, he insisted, is “against workers being exploited, and they're against this Tory government.”

What a colossal lie! Starmer publicly opposed the rail strikes only 24 hours earlier, leading Lynch to declare, “If somebody could tell me where Labour are I'd be very happy to hear it.” Following Lynch's cynical U-turn, PoliticsHome leaked a letter to Labour shadow cabinet members telling them, “We have robust lines. We do not want to see these strikes to go ahead with the resulting disruption to the public” and “to that end, please be reminded that frontbenchers including [parliamentary private secretaries] should not be on picket lines.”

Left in the hands of the unions and the Labour Party, the strikes will be betrayed. Rail workers and the millions of other workers pushing for industrial action cannot go into battle under a leadership desperately seeking to surrender. They must urgently form their own strategy for victory and their own leading organisations to see it through.

The Socialist Equality Party (Britain) statement, “The British rail strike: Mobilise the entire working class against the Johnson government!”, advances a programme of action on which to fight the government and the employers. It calls for:

An inflation-busting 20 percent pay rise for rail workers! This must be fought for through coordinated action by drivers, conductors, maintenance and station staff. Against the claims that there is “no money” to fund

public transport, decent pay and pensions, they must fight for socialist measures, including the expropriation of the rail companies under workers' control.

Defeat the Great British Railways scheme! The pay freeze imposed on rail workers, over £3 billion in cuts, and the threat to eliminate thousands of jobs and eviscerate pensions are all part of the Tory plan for Great British Railways. The RMT, ASLEF and TSSA are Johnson's partners in this scheme through the Rail Industry Recovery Group.

Expand and unify disputes in every sector! Workers are voting for strike action over the same issues and confront determined, ultra-wealthy employers. The unions' efforts to suppress and divide struggles must be overcome and preparations made to organise a general strike.

Wage a political fight to bring down the Johnson government! A general strike cannot succeed in its aims without mounting a political challenge directly against the Johnson government implementing historic attacks in every sector on behalf of the corporations and the super-rich.

Build the Socialist Equality Party as the leadership of the working class! The Labour Party offers no alternative to Johnson's Tories. They are equally right-wing parties of authoritarianism, militarism, mass infection and austerity. Workers need their own party to fight for their interests on a socialist, internationalist programme.

The fight for these demands requires above all the construction of new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees accountable to the workers themselves and forging links across companies, industries and national borders. We urge workers wanting to take up this perspective to discuss it with their colleagues and contact the SEP and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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