

Network Rail engineer in Sheffield, UK speaks on risk to safety from cuts and fragmentation

Our reporters
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“Safety will be compromised 100 percent. We already don’t have enough staff to do the work as it stands.”

A WSWs reporting team spoke to an experienced maintenance engineer on the picket line at the Network Rail depot on Blast Lane, Sheffield.

The worker, whose name has been withheld for protection, raised the danger that the slashing of jobs was taking the national rail back to the dark days of Railtrack. In 1994, track, signalling, tunnels, level crossings and stations were handed over to the private sector when British Rail was privatised.

A series of mass fatality disasters followed, including train collisions at Southall in 1997, Ladbroke Grove in 1999 and the Hatfield derailment in 2000. All were linked to the degradation of safety by private operators. Railtrack went into bankruptcy and was bailed out by the Labour government, with rail infrastructure brought back into public ownership on an arms-length basis by the establishment of Network Rail in 2002.

“Nobody speaks about the fact that there are constantly positions opened up in Bands 1-4 which are effectively management grades for people who have no experience in the rail network. They bring them on with company cars on £60-70,000 a year jobs, who then sit in offices around the country who have never been outside.

“The ground level staff, who are physically on the line, are outnumbered by 5 to 1. It is an upside-down pyramid. The more they move towards the fragmentation of maintenance it’s effectively a retreat to the Railtrack days. There were four major disasters before they retreated from that idea. But it’s the same government, same policies, same rhetoric the same circle of Thatcher politics.

“The current figure they are releasing for job losses is between two-and-a-half to three thousand people. The part they don’t discuss as part of the modernisation of the railway programme, where they are talking about changing team positions and reducing staff on that basis, the original figure is closer to 15,000. It is in a Network Rail published document. For instance, where you need three people to do certain jobs, taking it down to two is just not physically possible. If you do, you just encourage risk, you encourage danger and eventually people are going to die.

“We work in locations such as old power signal boxes where there are loads of electro-mechanical components all over the place; it can involve running between 100 and 200 wires to renew something. Sounds simple enough. If you cross two of those wires over, that’s two trains into one another—head on—and you’ve just killed 600 people.”

The gravity of the situation facing workers raised broader issues of strategy to defeat the Johnson government.

“The pay rise is focussed on by the mainstream press, but it is one small part of the whole thing. Within reason everyone wants a fair pay rise, that is the same for every public sector worker. They keep saying they can only afford a pay increase if it’s fair on the public pocket, but surely if that is the case, why is every public sector worker not entitled to the same protection as MPs? Why aren’t I entitled to claim for travel expenses every time I have to drive somewhere, or to claim every time I need food or a babysitter. How does that work?

“You can’t go down the public sector line and say ‘everybody is the same’ when you are effectively at

the highest level as a public worker. You can call yourself a member of parliament, but you are still employed by the people in exactly the same way as I am, as doctors, fire brigade and nurses. A general strike won't be called by the entire public sector until you get every union on the same wavelength, which at the minute the TUC [Trades Union Congress] can't do.

“We've got a Labour Party who aren't supporting the strike by the workers who originally started the Labour Party. It is the same as all the others now. It wants to sit on the centre fence. There is no movement away from the centre line because if you are seen as anything other, you are vilified. You've got the likes of Rupert Murdoch, who is the pinnacle of shit, who is in control of the majority of papers. It is a well-publicised fact that you cannot get into power unless you have Murdoch on side.”

WSWS reporters pointed out there was a growing sentiment for a general strike against the Johnson government which the unions—including the RMT—were sitting on. This shows the need for rank-and-file committees organised by workers themselves to take up a political fight against the Johnson government. The fact that Labour has lined up squarely against strike action underlined the need for the building of a new political party for the working class. Pickets took copies of a statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party calling for the mobilisation of the entire working class against the Johnson government.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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