

British rail strike solid in the face of government attacks

Chris Marsden, Thomas Scripps
21 June 2022

Rail workers—we want to hear from you. Contact us with updates on the strike, descriptions of your conditions, and your views on the struggle that must be waged.

Tuesday was the start of the UK national rail strikes called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, with more strike days planned for Thursday and Saturday and rail services expected to be heavily disrupted throughout the week. Workers on the London Underground also took strike action, closing most of the capital's tube lines and severely restricting the service on others.

The *World Socialist Web Site* provided live strike updates throughout the day.

The mood on the picket lines was determined. Workers described lives made unliveable by the cost-of-living crisis, gruelling overtime, understaffing and funding cuts. They reported plans for a savage and dangerous attack on jobs, wages, terms and conditions on the railways.

Many strikers recognised that the fight has only just began and raised the call for broader action, including a general strike, citing other sections of workers pushing for industrial action. #RailStrikes was a top-trending hashtag on Twitter throughout the day, and thousands were using #GeneralStrike and #GeneralStrikeNow.

This sentiment sets the working class on a collision course with a Conservative government intent on smashing any resistance. The Tories responded to the strikes by repeating every threat made in the past weeks and insisting that this would be a fight to the finish. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps gave interviews to the BBC and Sky News rejecting complaints by the RMT and the Labour Party that they should hold talks to end the dispute.

The Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon

Brown had never negotiated with striking “firefighters and post office workers,” he said. The government would instead change the law to allow firms to bring in agency workers as scabs during strikes and was still committed to enacting minimum service legislation during strikes, rendering industrial action ineffective.

Expressing sympathy towards the RMT's offer to wind down the dispute, Sky News's Kay Burley asked Shapps, “Why aren't you rolling up your sleeves and getting around the table with the unions this week so that we won't have another two strikes?”

Her supportive noises indicate the fears of some within ruling circles that the rail strikes could ignite a broader movement in the working class and their understanding that the RMT's portrayal as an intransigent opponent is bogus.

Confirmation came from Eddie Dempsey, RMT senior assistant general secretary, who told the *Independent*, “A lot of what the government is saying is lunatic hyperbole and incendiary remarks. They don't want a settlement... if we can get that settlement these strikes will be called off.” He then heaped praise on the management of Network Rail and the train operators, who he said had conducted themselves “with grace” and “properly.”

Andrew Haines, chief executive of Network Rail, also told *Times Radio* he had come very close to reaching a deal with the RMT last night on “a credible package for colleagues with the sort of workplace reforms that would be valued for the taxpayer as well. We were within a gnat's whisker of that.”

Only Tory intransigence prevented a rotten sell-out by the RMT. Prime Minister Boris Johnson reiterated his own determination to defeat the rail workers. At a cabinet meeting, he cautioned against Ukrainian war “fatigue”, insisting that the UK remain “steadfast” and

that fiscal discipline must also be maintained. This meant pushing through reforms in the rail industry and more broadly. “And we need the union barons to sit down with Network Rail and the train companies and get on with it.”

The country “needs to get ready to stay the course... This government was elected to do the difficult things...”

The bulk of Britain’s press was with Johnson in his drive to defeat the rail workers and make an example to the wider working class. The *Daily Mail* wrote, “If rail bosses and ministers capitulate, it would undoubtedly trigger similar eye-popping wage claims across the public sector...”

The *Telegraph* called for state repression: “With a majority of 80, the Government could introduce emergency laws tomorrow. It should also stop the strikers making up their losses through overtime. It is time to get tough”.

The *Times* insisted, “The government must stand firm,” and Prime Minister Boris Johnson “demonstrate he is ready to do whatever it takes”.

The Labour Party spent the day affirming its opposition to the rail strike, while complaining that the Tories had provoked it and could work with the unions to call it off. This position was shared by the right under Sir Keir Starmer and the remnants of the Corbynite left.

Only a handful of Labour MPs, plus former leader Jeremy Corbyn now sitting as an independent, joined picket lines after Starmer’s instruction yesterday to stay away. Most were Corbyn’s dwindling group of allies, including former Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, Socialist Campaign Group leader Richard Burgon, former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, and former national Union of Mineworkers leader Ian Lavery. But others, including Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar, attended out of a shared concern that Starmer has destroyed whatever support Labour still enjoys in the working class.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch has appealed to Starmer and “his team” to “ride the wave of resistance” and back the strikes. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, “we expect Labour MPs to defend workers, by words and by actions... It’s time to decide whose side you are on. Workers or bad bosses?”

All such rhetoric, whether from the trade unions, the

Labour “left, or even some within the Blairite right, is only to sugar the bitter pill of calls for a negotiated sell-out.

These are the three parties in the rail strike and every industrial struggle ongoing or threatened: the majority faction of the ruling class led by Johnson seeking to crush strikes with brute force; the unions and their supporters in the ruling class arguing for a peaceable surrender; and the working class searching for a way to fight for its interests.

Workers face a war on two fronts. Johnson’s Tories can call on the entire apparatus of the state and the media, the unions on their bureaucratic apparatus and friends in the Labour Party. To overcome these obstacles, the working class needs its own organisations and its own programme for emerging victorious—rank-and-file committees of workers in every workplace fighting for inflation-busting pay increases, an end to all attacks on jobs, pensions and conditions, and the bringing down of this hated government.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to contact us today to take up this struggle, with the aid of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Visit our rail strike page for updates and essential reading.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact