

Rail workers rally in Glasgow: “We can’t let them get away with it”

Steve James
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In Scotland today, around 100 striking rail workers and Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) members, including from Avanti West Coast, along with trade union delegations and supporters attended a picket outside Glasgow Central Station. A delegation of P&O Ferry workers, sacked from the company’s Cairnryan to Larne route, also joined.

Although workers at Scotland’s main carrier ScotRail are not currently on strike, just a handful of services were running because rail infrastructure, track maintenance, cleaning and other services are provided by Network Rail.

ScotRail workers will themselves soon be balloting on a five percent below-inflation pay offer from the company. While the RMT is reportedly going to recommend the offer be rejected, train drivers’ union ASLEF has recommended the same pay cut package be accepted by its members.

Workers who spoke to our WSWs reporter highlighted the safety implications of the government’s proposals, as well as the impact of rising inflation. All raised the importance of the broadest possible support for the striking rail workers.

Paul is a customer service manager, “The main issues we are facing are job cuts, security and pensions and of course a pay rise. I’ve just had to redo my mortgage as it’s jumped up from £344 to £415. My gas and electricity have gone up by £70 a month. My wife needs to use a car every day for work, we are filling it up twice a week now and it’s costing £116 each time compared to £60—almost double, so the cost of living has rocketed. Seven percent is not enough but it would certainly help to cover it.

“The majority of my work is to do with the safety side. If they do away with it—the track maintenance and track workers—the proposals would put people’s lives at risk. They are talking about putting drones on and taking away some of the trains that run up and down checking it. They want reactive instead of proactive maintenance on the tracks which is unacceptable.

“This is two years after Stonehaven [derailment] where three died and we have Grayrigg [another fatal derailment] close to us. These guys do absolutely vital work and they

make sure we’re safe on the track. They make sure the trains are safe, and the track’s safe.

“On top of that they are attacking the pension to try and make us work longer and pay more and be poorer over time, it’s astonishing. We’ve not had a pay rise in three years, and we worked all the way through coronavirus.

“The response from other workers today and on Tuesday has been absolutely phenomenal. People coming up to us wanting to buy us coffees, bring us bags of food. They want to find out and listen to what the issues are.

“The media have been totally one sided. We are extremely lucky to have a fantastic leader in Mick Lynch who has supported us very well. What they seem to forget is Mick Lynch didn’t vote for the strike, we voted for the strike and Mick Lynch is acting on our instructions. We voted unanimously for strike action and he’s just following up our wishes.

“The next step needs to be the government stepping away from the talks, stop dealing backhandedly and let the train companies talk for themselves. I believe the company want to do a deal and I think the government are stopping it.

“I agree there needs to be a broader mobilisation. Several different unions—Unite, Unison, CWU, the teachers have all been here the last two days all offering their support and telling us the same thing: we want to vote for a strike. They want the same thing, and they are watching us with open eyes. We’re leading the way, the RMT members have let their voice be heard already and everybody else is going to follow suit.

“People are talking about a general strike. There needs to be a major mobilisation or a mass change to get rid of this Tory government.”

Graham explained his role as a train manager and the reason for the strike, “You are the safety inspector, the second safety person to the drivers. If there is ever any sort of serious emergency on board, or the driver is incapacitated in any way, it is your job to look after the public and manage the situation.

“We are on strike to prevent the attack on our pay and

conditions. We have been on a pay freeze for the last three years. We are losing a lot more than we are asking for at the minute, which does not seem to be unreasonable. But when you are dealing with an unreasonable government which just puts blocks in your way, there is no scope for negotiation. They are not interested in negotiation. They are just interested in divide and conquer.”

Asked about the way forward, given the Johnson government’s determination to inflict its agenda, Graham explained, “We are just hoping to get the public’s support. If we can get public support and the rest of the working people behind us—because every working person deserves a pay rise, especially in the public sector where wages have been frozen for about 10 years. People are thousands and thousands of pounds worse off. It is becoming unsustainable to work in these industries because people can’t afford to work anymore. Any sort of support is welcome, whether it is online, or people just turning up at a picket line to offer support. It all helps.”

Graham considered the parallels with the miners’ strike of 1984-85. “The government perceives this. They showed that with Mick Lynch the other day on the news, they were trying to push him into saying we would use threats of violence against anyone that tried to break a picket line. This was a ridiculous line of questioning from someone that was supposed to be a respected reporter.”

Asked about how the RMT’s seven percent pay claim compared with inflation, Graham said, “We all understand that inflation can rise and fall, we are not looking for anything that is unreasonable. Seven percent is still a pay cut, but it is not unreasonable given private sector pay has gone up 6.8 percent.”

But he agreed that workers needed above inflation pay rises, “The teachers were asking for that yesterday and they were told that was ridiculous. But teachers have been under pay constraints for the last 10 years, they desperately need that. We have been frozen for the last three years.”

On the possibility of a general strike, Graham said, “Public sector workers really need to come out in support of it. It is all public sector workers, not just the railway, not just the teachers. It is the nurses, it is everybody, the police, the fire brigade, they are getting through everybody.”

Margaret from Glasgow works in catering, “The main reason I’m on strike is for the safety of the railway. I know the media aren’t portraying that as the main reason, but they are trying to cut 2,500 jobs from Network Rail. They are the ones who are keeping us safe by inspecting the tracks and that’s the biggest reason for me. There are other factors as well, but safety is the main one for me.

“Things would be much more dangerous, not just for rail workers but for passengers as well. You’ve had derailments

even in the last few years—Stonehaven. I just don’t understand how that can be skipped. The pay rise, the job cuts, the changes to our terms and conditions so basically, they are wanting people to come in and do more hours for the same amount of money.

“Recently when everyone on social media was saying about how much train drivers get paid, it’s not really about that. The cost of living has gone up for everyone, so it doesn’t really matter what you get paid, what you get is less.

“Trying to cover your bills every month is getting harder. We don’t get any shift allowance, so we don’t know what the hours are going to be. None of us wants to be on strike and hurt the public.”

Benny has worked on the railways for 33 years, “The changes have been drastic. A lot of people have a controlled environment, but we are constantly going through changes, different aspirations from different employers. It’s not just the pay or the money but terms and conditions and protecting jobs for the next generation of railway workers which is probably more important than most, because if they don’t get a grip of this now, they might not get to come into this industry.

“I think it’s a major confrontation with the government and to be honest I don’t think the government’s views are ever going to change. I think if there’s a continuous round of strikes, they might be forced to do something. They are losing a lot of money and passengers.

“I totally agree it has to involve other sections of workers and we can’t let them get away with it. I do agree they are trying to impose their finances on the general public, on the workers. We worked through the pandemic, but think about what doctors and nurses went through, they never really had anything back for that. We all need to stand strong.”



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