

RMT says new UK rail strikes in July after talks with Network Rail and train operators break down

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Thursday's second of three one-day national strikes by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union went ahead after talks with the employers collapsed. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch said a further round of strikes will likely be called after the final strike of the current round on Saturday.

With two weeks' notice required under the anti-union, anti-strike laws, a possible date of July 9 has been suggested. This would precede possible strikes by the ASLEF train drivers' union, balloting till July 11 for pay strikes at 11 train operating companies, including Arriva Rail London, Chiltern Railways, Great Western, LNER, Northern Trains, Southeastern, TransPennine Express and West Midlands Trains. The drivers could then strike from July 25. A strike ballot at Avanti West Coast, CrossCountry and Direct Rail Services closes July 27.

Significant strikes are now also threatened by airport workers. Around 350 GMB members at Heathrow airport have voted overwhelmingly for action and the same result is expected of a similar number of their co-workers represented by Unite when its ballot closes Monday. The dispute is over BA's use of fire and rehire to slash 10 percent off wages during the pandemic and brings the workers into struggle alongside airport and airline staff across Europe in Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Dates have not been announced but the strike is expected to be scheduled for the school summer holidays.

Bitter exchanges took place Thursday between Lynch and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, who the RMT leader blamed for having "wrecked" negotiations by preventing Network Rail from withdrawing a letter

threatening statutory redundancy for up to 2,900 rail workers. He repeated his call for the government to "unshackle" Network Rail and the train operating companies to facilitate a settlement.

The Tories want no negotiations because they aim to inflict a massive defeat on the rail workers to deter threatened strikes by train drivers, Royal Mail and BT workers, teachers, civil servants and NHS workers as well as airport workers.

In line with this, the *Times* reported that the Treasury "has told cabinet ministers that any pay rises for public sector workers must come from their existing budgets," meaning that any extra funding will have to be found through spending cuts. This sets a maximum pay increase across the entire public sector of just the 3 percent already budgeted for—a de facto 10 percent-plus cut by the autumn due to inflation.

The claim that Network Rail and the train operating companies are innocent victims of Tory intransigence disarms rail workers as to the nature of the struggle they face. The government and its arm's length rail infrastructure company are equally determined to smash the strikes.

Shapps declared disingenuously that he had "absolutely nothing to do" with Network Rail's letter or any request to withdraw it. Stressing his common stand with the company, he added, "I understand that the letter makes no mention of 2,900 redundancies, but I do know it confirmed Network Rail would be introducing desperately needed reforms for the industry after the union chose strike action instead of further talks."

On BBC *Breakfast* this morning, Lynch hailed the deal struck on Merseyrail as an example of what can be

achieved when “the Treasury are not pulling the strings.”

Members of the Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA) union accepted a 7.1 percent pay deal Wednesday. According to the *Guardian*, the RMT was also involved in the negotiations and plans to put the deal to its own members.

Lynch added, “Where Grant Shapps has no influence on this railway we are getting deals and getting offers that are likely to be more progressive than the ones we’re getting from Westminster.”

RMT Assistant General Secretary Eddie Dempsey told Radio 4’s *Today*, “Wherever we’re dealing with somebody who’s not directly controlled by the [Department for Transport], we’re making progress: London Underground 8.5 percent; Docklands Light Railway, we’ve got an inflation-busting deal [9 percent]; Crossrail, same thing; Transport for Wales, we’re in the business of negotiating something there now; Merseyrail, 7.1 percent.”

Deals for 7-9 percent have in fact already fallen behind inflation, which is now at 11.7 percent RPI and rising. The RMT and the other rail unions are not leading a joint struggle for an above-inflation pay increase, or even one in line with inflation, but doing all they can to police rising social opposition.

TSSA General Secretary Manuel Cortes said of the Merseyrail deal, “What this clearly shows is our union, and sister unions, are in no way a block on finding the solutions needed to avoid a summer of discontent on the railways.”

The RMT’s own declared aims are for a similar below-inflation 7 percent pay rise and a commitment to no compulsory redundancies, in exchange for agreeing to many of the employers’ demands. Lynch told BBC *Breakfast*, “We need a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies and when we get that we can move on positively to the other agenda items, which includes changes to working practices, and the adoption of new technology.”

Even this rotten deal is considered out of the question by the employers as well as the government. Tim Shoveller, Network Rail’s chief negotiator, told *Today* a deal around 7 percent was “very unlikely”—“The difference between the three per cent on the table now and a 7.1 percent deal is this £65 million every year... that is £65 million a year, every year of additional

savings that have to be found in order to fund that difference.”

Steve Montgomery, who chairs the Rail Delivery Group representing train operators, refused to rule out compulsory redundancies on BBC *Breakfast*, but made clear that a “voluntary” scheme could be offered: “we just need to get through the processes and see how many people are left, and hopefully nobody requires to be made compulsory redundant.”

Hostility to the rail workers is shared fully by the Labour Party. This week, party leader Sir Keir Starmer threatened to discipline MPs who attend pickets of a strike the party opposes.

After Saturday’s strike is over, depending on a public apology, Starmer will decide how to punish frontbenchers Paula Barker, Kate Osborne, Alex Sobel and Navendu Mishra. He also has a chance to deal with another 20 MPs including most of what remains of the now deeply fractured Corbynite “left” of the party, among them Diane Abbott, Richard Burgon, John McDonnell, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Belle Ribeiro-Addy and Ian Lavery—a gift-wrapped opportunity to carry out expulsions.

Yesterday, Starmer set out to make clear he will back the imposition of below-inflation pay awards by the Tories. His spokesman told the *Times* that “we respect the work of the public sector pay review bodies and it’s their job to come forward with recommendations.”

Asked specifically whether Starmer would back below-inflation awards, the spokesman added, “Our starting point would be to look at what the pay review bodies come forward with and our assumption would be that that would be what we would support.”



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