

# “Hopeful” talks between RMT and the employers ahead of Saturday’s rail strike in Britain

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24 June 2022

A third day of strike action on the railways takes place Saturday. Pickets and rallies have been organised throughout the country, with the network to be largely paralysed again. Support for the strike remains solid in the working class, particularly among young workers.

However, the strike’s strong showing should not distract from the fact that concerted efforts were made throughout Thursday and Friday to have the action called off.

Talks between the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) and the employers continued, with heavy hints by sources close to Network Rail and the train operating companies that a deal could be reached. The *Financial Times* said the Network Rail dispute centred on “modernising working practices within the network’s maintenance unit, which employs 10,000 workers.”

The government-run infrastructure company has offered a 3 percent pay rise, funded by attacks including an immediate 1,800 job cuts. This process of statutory redundancies was announced Wednesday and was cited by the RMT as making Thursday’s action inevitable.

But the RMT is not opposing redundancies or specifying what other attacks it considers a red line, if any. It has only demanded a “written commitment from Network Rail that it will not implement compulsory redundancies,” the FT wrote, along with a 7 percent pay rise—already four percent below inflation.

The *Times* wrote with a similar appraisal, stating that senior rail sources had said, “Bosses at Network Rail hinted that they had put together a package that met one of the RMT’s key demands to end strike action” late Thursday.

The *Times* noted that chief negotiator Tim Shoveller told the BBC, “We think we’ve got a package of no compulsory redundancies and some other long sought-

after things that the union and our employees have been after” and now wanted the RMT to agree to “the productivity [gains] to pay for it...”

Shoveller confirmed that Network Rail might also increase its 3 percent pay offer, but not to 7 percent.

The *Times* was optimistic that the RMT would eventually do a deal. “More than 30 per cent of the engineering workforce is over 50,” it wrote, and “would be offered redundancy under the terms of a voluntary severance scheme (VSS) that has already been used in some earlier rounds of redundancy.” This offers just two weeks’ basic pay for every year of service, up to a maximum of 35 years and payments above £30,000 are subject to tax and national insurance contributions.

This is the type of employers’ offer, made in behind-the-scenes discussions, that RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch has repeatedly called on the government to “unleash” so a deal can be struck.

Separately the FT wrote, “Ministers, meanwhile, remained ‘hopeful’ that a pay deal could be struck with railway unions...One senior government official close to the negotiations said the union’s private position was markedly different from its executive’s public rhetoric. ‘The RMT are being far more reasonable in the private talks than the bellicose language in public,’ he said... Another senior official said the fact the RMT had not announced more strike dates this summer ‘suggested there is still space to do a deal’.”

The dominant and public position of the government is to deepen its preparations for a state assault on rail workers and the entire working class. Having repeatedly and deliberately spiked union/management negotiations, it intends to take on and defeat the rail workers to provide a bludgeon against the growing threat of strikes across multiple sectors.

On Thursday, the government issued a press release in the name of Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps pledging to move ahead next week with legal changes allowing the use of agency workers as a scab workforce. The release stressed that the change in law by statutory instrument “will apply across all sectors”. It cited education strikes that “can often mean parents have to stay at home with their children rather than go to work” along with “rail sector strikes stopping commuters getting to work or to other businesses.”

The government is also raising the maximum damages that courts can award against a union “when strike action has been found by the court to be unlawful” from £250,000 to £1 million.

Nevertheless, at this point it is the trade union bureaucracy’s active suppression of the class struggle on which the Tories rely to stay in power.

London Underground workers, also represented by the RMT, renewed their ballot for strike action yesterday. They are opposing Transport for London (TfL) cuts of over 10 percent of frontline staff, 600 jobs, and cuts to the pension scheme.

There were once again suggestions that any job cuts could be made voluntarily. TfL’s chief operating officer told the *Standard* after the vote, “[O]ur proposals will ensure any reduction in roles is achieved through vacancy management,” while stressing, “we have to become more efficient.”

The RMT has been seeking just such a deal with the Labour London Mayor Sadiq Khan and TfL, keeping strike action to a minimum while asking Khan “to stand up to the Tory government” and meet with the union. Since receiving an ironclad mandate in January, it has carried out just four one-day strikes, calling off action scheduled for June 3 during the Queen’s Jubilee. There are currently no new strike dates planned.

On Thursday, members of the train drivers’ union ASLEF on Greater Anglia walked out in a pay dispute, again with no further strike dates planned.

Roughly 700 British Airways staff at Heathrow represented by Unite and the GMB also voted overwhelmingly to strike, but no action has yet been organised and none is expected until late July at the earliest. Unite added that it had given BA a “short window” to come back with an improved offer before it set strike dates. The two unions are “consulting” engineers and call centre staff at Gatwick, Glasgow, Manchester and Newcastle on strikes—a tried and tested

means of avoiding holding an actual strike ballot.

If all the workers currently threatening to ballot for industrial action had been mobilised, the health, education, rail transport, local government, postal and civil services would now be in the grip of major struggles involving close to 3 million workers overall—a movement more than capable of toppling the rotten Johnson government. That this has not taken place is due to the deliberate efforts of the trade unions.

Although 13 National Health Service unions and the two major teaching unions have said they could strike against the imposition of a 3 percent pay rise, the only unions to even organise strike ballots are the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and ASLEF.

The CWU served notice on Royal Mail on behalf of its 115,000 members. Ballot papers will be dispatched June 28, with results announced July 19. Another two weeks would be needed before any action was taken. Royal Mail Group has imposed a 2 percent pay award by executive action raising the prospect that the strings it had originally demanded as part of an additional 3.5 percent will be implemented unilaterally. In the face of these dictatorial moves the CWU is pursuing ongoing talks.

ASLEF is balloting till July 11 for pay strikes at 11 train operating companies, meaning the absolute earliest they could strike is July 25.

Workers must take the leadership of these disputes into their own hands. The “Summer of Discontent” must become a “Summer of Struggle” through a political counter-offensive against the trade union bureaucracy determined to delay, divide and demobilise strikes. This requires the formation of new rank-and-file organisations with a perspective for leading and unifying the whole working class, supported by its class brothers and sisters internationally, in a general strike against the Johnson government.



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