

Rail workers and supporters speak at London rally

"The Tories don't want to give anyone a rise. They want to suppress the wages of everyone"

Our reporters
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Around 1,000 people attended a rally in support of striking rail workers in front of London King's Cross station. A signalman based in the station told our reporters, "I'm glad people are standing together because it's just not on. We didn't have a pay rise throughout the pandemic and now they plan to sack about 3,000 people. People have had enough. They worked all the way through the pandemic just to be sacked.

"There are lot of other people from other sectors, this is the catalyst for it. The powers that be aren't doing anything. We have to create change. The airlines are going to strike and the postal workers—I'll stand with them."

William, a signalling maintainer with 10 years' experience, explained, "They say they don't support fire and rehire, but the plan of Network Rail was to do away with a grade, which is about 3,000 jobs, and then create a new grade and hire some of them back. That is fire and rehire, it definitely is. They pay out all this money in profits but then when somebody asks for a pay rise in line with inflation after working through the pandemic, nothing!

"When [Prime Minister] Boris Johnson first announced on the news on the pandemic that you shouldn't go outside unless it was a necessity, I was on my way to work. I was at work that night with no mask, no PPE. No one had got organised. We all worked through it. All the managers worked from home throughout the pandemic. But as soon as it was over the managers said, 'we've got a plan, we are going to sack you all.'"

Describing the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, William said, "Everything is more expensive, it's quite hard. We are lucky in our job we have the availability to do overtime. A lot of people rely on working overtime to survive and pay our bills. I don't have kids but some that do have to work on the side for them. There is not much left over after paying my bills and rent. There is not much left over if I don't go get extra shifts. It's just working and paying bills."

Asked if he thought the strike was a political struggle, he answered, "Yes, the Tories don't want to give anyone a rise. They want to suppress the wages of everyone. If we in the RMT stand up it leads the way for other people to stand up. We want everyone to have a pay rise, like a lot of the socialist people here, we want everyone to have a rise. Someone has got to start the thing and stand up."

A customer services assistant told us, "We feel that, the last three days of strikes we've done, 99 percent of the public are totally with us. People have given us food, drinks, been clapping for us, buses and taxis tooting their horns.

"For us, job security is number one, then our terms and conditions and a pay rise. Inflation is through the roof, everything's gone up. We've got station staff up and down the country and no one gets paid for working Sundays. We've got to do 18 Sundays for free, a year, without one penny."

A mobility assistant based at Victoria station said, "I'm a single parent and if I lose my job, I'm homeless. I work full-time and the money is not enough even to pay my rent. I need to apply for universal

credit. It's shame on the company. We're begging for benefits to survive—this is not right.

“During the pandemic, we were the ones working every single day. We never stopped working. They didn't support us. We were risking our lives to keep the railways moving. Do you know what it's like to go to work every day praying you don't catch COVID because you will infect all your family, to fear to go to work?”

Her colleague added, “Every time I go to the shop, I'm watching all the time what I'm buying, thinking about what I have in my pocket. I have to think about it all the time, I think about it at night. Do I have enough? I have two boys. I'm a single mother. It's hard, it's very hard. But together we will win. We will be strong, and we have power together. We need to stand together for our rights. Everybody has to stand up.”

Montasiq, a train dispatcher at Cannon Street station, said, “We are going on strike because inflation is very high now. We haven't increased our salary for the past three years when it's supposed to be increased three percent every year. Gas and electricity is increasing, and food, so we are struggling to put food on our table.

“If this is not listened to by the employers, we are going to do it again. We are sorry to the members of the public who want to go to school or appointments, but this is the only way we can achieve our goal. If they don't want to listen to us, we have to strike again.

“I believe 100 percent other workers are going to join with us—airport workers and the National Health Service.”

A contingent of workers from the ongoing strike at St George's Hospital against outsourcer Mitie joined the rally. “It's one struggle,” they said, “we need to fight together.” Rail workers “came to support us, so we are here to support them.”

Elizabeth spoke about the experience working in the pandemic, “It was very, very bad. We lost so many colleagues during the pandemic. These people [Mitie] don't care. They didn't even pay tribute to them.

“We're here because we want to work together to get something out of this. The way they are treating us is not fair. Our colleagues from the railway also came to join us. Now people are hearing our grievances, are listening to us.

Asked about going out in a general strike, Elizabeth said she supported the idea: “Yes, we have to. The

government doesn't care. Our company doesn't care. We're forced to work, even when sick. Some of our colleagues don't even get sick pay. After the pandemic and all we have suffered, when you are sick you don't get paid. You force yourself to come in even with an infection, and infect so many other people. If you stay home, nobody will pay you.”

Other workers came to support the strike. **Kieran**, a young chef, explained, “In this last few weeks, I've felt really inspired by the movement. It's the working class that kept the country going, but it's the working class that always have to bite the bullet. Ever since I've been old enough to understand, all I've ever known is austerity and cuts, while it's us that have to pay for everything, while profits have never been higher.”

The claim there was no money was “rubbish. We're one of the richest countries in the world, but have one of the highest poverty rates among the richest countries. It's got to stop, enough is enough, basically.”

“When it comes to the military, arms sales, it's all an excuse. That's why you see in the media, whenever this is brought up, they'll mention ‘Oh, but Ukraine. Oh, but the pandemic. Oh, but Brexit.’ Brexit and Ukraine are all the Tories' choice, so enough is enough.”



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