UK: RMT's Mick Lynch tries to rehabilitate Keir Starmer and Labour

Thomas Scripps
26 June 2022

On Saturday, the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union held a strike rally outside London King's Cross station, attended by around a 1,000 people.

Assistant General Secretary of the RMT Eddie Dempsey, Communication Workers Union General Secretary Dave Ward, RMT NEC member Jared Wood and International Transport Workers Federation President Paddy Crumlin collectively denounced "15 years of falling real wages", "bailing out private companies" to support "the profits of private companies who've been robbing the British people for years", and a "war on workers being launched by" the "something like 70 people in the world [who] control the same wealth as 4 billion working men and women."

They lauded the RMT for doing more "in the last couple of weeks" than "any political party's been able to do for decades and decades" and called for workers to "strike together", carry out "common bargaining agendas across all sections of the economy", "rebuild[ing] the welfare state in the UK", and demand a "new deal for workers" and "socialism".

These statements echo the sentiments of millions of workers who see the rail strike as the beginning of a long-overdue fightback against the Johnson government and the employers. But it is necessary to cut through such rhetoric in order to understand the actual role played by the trade union bureaucracy in the struggles now unfolding.

The union leaders were talking about reversing a socio-economic disaster for which they are responsible. They and their forerunners have divided, deceived and demobilised workers for decades, leading to an unprecedented collapse in the social position of the working class. A wave of opposition is now forcing these pro-company bureaucrats to mouth radical demagogy, but their political function has not changed a jot.

This was strikingly confirmed by the closing speech of the rally delivered by RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch.

Over the past weeks, Lynch has won a substantial following among workers as someone leading a popular strike and able to make the most frothing right-wing pundits look as stupid as they are. Especially effective are his repeated references to the desperate cost-of-living crisis facing his members and the entire working class. His criticisms of Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer's opposition to the rail strike have resonated widely.

Lynch's speech to the rally again won warm support, successfully concealing the fact that he once again called only for "no compulsory redundancies" and "a pay-rise that suits the cost-of-living crisis" as the RMT's sole and "simple" demands: "Give it to us and there'll be no strike action through summer."

What the RMT wants is negotiated redundancies and a maximum 7 percent pay rise, already more than 4 points below the rate of inflation already, in exchange for a promise of no strikes.

Lynch's most extraordinary comments, however, were on the Labour Party. He managed to stun his audience into silence with what he called a "message to people in our movement, Keir Starmer and others".

Starmer, said Lynch, is "hesitating… but I want him to be prime minister. That's what we've got. He must win. We've got to push him and persuade him to get into a position where he's in the front rank with you, all of you."

The shock generated is understandable. Starmer has not hesitated at all; he stands in the front rank of the rail strike's opponents. This week he took the unprecedented step, one that Tony Blair would have balked at, of forbidding Labour MPs from visiting picket lines. He is now deciding how to punish those very few, some 25, who refused.

Lynch's decision to back Starmer as all that "we've

got" and the leader of a future Labour government is aimed at keeping the working class under the thumb of a viciously right-wing party.

This was underscored by Diane Abbott, shadow home secretary under former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who told the rally, "I have to say, I don't understand this argument that Labour MPs should not be on RMT picket lines."

There is no argument. A diktat has been issued, like that issued by Starmer in February demanding "unshakeable support" for NATO by Labour MPs, on pain of expulsion. On this basis alone, there is no chance of Abbott's close friend and political ally Corbyn ever being readmitted to the Parliamentary Labour Party. But that did not stop her from declaring, "Nobody wants to attack NATO" and "I am a loyal supporter of Keir Starmer".

Abbott claims she "does not understand" what Starmer is doing is to excuse the refusal of the "Labour left" to fight against the right wing.

Skulking at the back of the RMT rally was Corbyn's former shadow chancellor John McDonnell. He did not speak from the platform but echoed Lynch in telling the media, "I'm saying to Keir Starmer and other Labour MPs as well, do the right thing… Follow your conscience, so therefore for me that means Labour MPs being on picket lines and it includes Keir Starmer as well coming off the fence, supporting working people because they're not asking for the world."

Starmer has witch-hunted thousands of left-wing Labour members out of the party on spurious charges. He is not sitting on the fence; he is lobbing bombs over it.

Shadow Justice Minister David Lammy gave his own response to such bankrupt appeals on the BBC's *Sunday Morning* show. Denouncing British Airways workers at Heathrow planning to strike for the return of the 10 percent of their wages knocked off during the pandemic, he said, "Many of us might want a rise of 10 percent. In truth, most people understand it's unlikely that you're going to get that." Asked if he supported the strikers he replied, "No, I don't. It's a no. It's a categorical no" because "I'm serious about the business of being in government."

Lynch and the RMT share the same concerns as Abbott and McDonnell. Last week, General Secretary of the Aslef train drivers' union Mick Whelan warned that Starmer's actions "may end the party". All "Starmer, do the right thing" demands are a desperate attempt to tie workers to the Labour Party in the face of its complete discrediting.

Maintaining the political stranglehold of Labour goes hand in hand with the unions' policing the class struggle.

Amid talk of the "Summer of Discontent", Lynch revealingly called for a "simmering summer"—that is, one which does not boil over. The RMT continues to call on the government to "unleash" the rail employers so a negotiated agreement can be reached. No new strike dates have yet been announced. In fact, from today, there are no major strikestaking place anywhere in the UK.

Ward's CWU will only begin balloting its Royal Mail members on Tuesday and only began balloting its British Telecom members on June 15 in a dispute rumbling since last year. The British Medical Association sent a letter to the rally declaring support but has not begun to ballot its own members.

Crumlin's International Transport Workers Federation has done nothing to mobilise any of its 20 million members, instead writing to Transport Secretary Grant Shapps warning the rail strikes will "risk" the "UK's international reputation on industrial relations" and urging talks with the RMT.

Millions of workers want a struggle against austerity, rampant profiteering, exploitation, job losses, and the Johnson government. Workers can do so by pushing for an immediate continuation and expansion of the rail strike and immediate ballots for action in every other sector.

This will necessarily be a political struggle. Workers will confront the full force of the state, wielded by the Tories and their Labour Party partners, in the same way as in the miners' strike of 1984-5, and must be prepared to defeat it.

They will be opposed by the entire trade union bureaucracy. New rank-and-file organisations must be built in every workplace and industry to defeat all efforts at suppression and sabotage, unite all workers in struggle and mobilise a general strike to bring down the Tories.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact