

Train drivers and salaried staff in UK balloted for strikes as unions block united fight

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Thousands of train drivers are being balloted for strike action by ASLEF against a three-year pay freeze, while thousands more clerical, customer service and management grade staff covered by the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) are being balloted over cuts to pay, jobs and conditions.

Overwhelming strike votes are widely expected, following three days of industrial action by Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) members on June 21, 23 and 25 that received solid backing. RMT pickets were honoured by drivers and supported by a majority of TSSA members.

Ballot results from train drivers are due on July 11 at Arriva Rail London, Chiltern Railways, Great Western, LNER, Northern Trains, Southeastern, TransPennine Express, and West Midlands Trains. Ballots close July 27 at Avanti West Coast, CrossCountry, and Direct Rail Services.

On June 9, ASLEF announced seven days of strikes by drivers at three companies: Greater Anglia on June 23 and July 2; Hull Trains on June 26; and London's Croydon Tramlink on June 28-29 and July 13-14. ASLEF called off strikes at Hull Trains after agreeing to "meaningful talks" with the company. The union is also balloting its members at ScotRail on a revised offer, with results due Friday.

If brought together, the strikes by ASLEF members would be the first national train drivers' strikes since 1995.

Yesterday marked the 40th anniversary of the national train drivers' strike against the Thatcher government's efforts, via the British Railways Board, to force through major attacks on conditions, including abolition of the 8-hour day. Indefinite strike action that began on July 4, 1982, was isolated and betrayed by the Trades Union

Congress (TUC) and ASLEF. Even after the Tories organised a national lockout on the railways, the TUC refused any action to support the drivers, paving the way for the strike's defeat and for Thatcher's offensive against the miners less than two years later.

The growing list of strike ballots across the railways reflects mounting opposition throughout the working class amid the greatest cost-of-living squeeze in decades, with RPI inflation at 11.7 percent and social inequality hitting record levels.

TSSA is balloting its 6,000 members at Network Rail (closing July 11) and thousands more across the train operating companies. At Cross Country and East Midlands Railway, ballots closed today, returning a clear mandate for strikes. Balloting closes at LNER, Northern and c2c on July 6, West Midlands Trains on July 7, Southeastern on July 11, and at Great Western Railway, TransPennine Express and Greater Anglia on July 13.

At Avanti West Coast, TSSA members voted 91.6 percent for strike action in ballot results announced last Wednesday. No dates for action have yet been announced.

TSSA members include managers, but also station and platform staff, train dispatchers, and onboard roles including driver managers. Its members at Network Rail include engineers, planners, signalling staff and operational and frontline maintenance. The lowest paid TSSA members include contact centre workers on just £18,800 a year, and station staff who are paid little more than £20,000.

Crucially, TSSA covers control room staff at Network Rail and the train companies who manage, schedule and direct all passenger and freight train services. No section of the railways can operate without their safety-critical role. The participation of TSSA manager grades would also undermine efforts by rail bosses to organise scab

replacements for striking RMT and ASLEF members.

Today's *Financial Times* noted fearfully in its headline, "UK faces first national train drivers' strike in 25 years", warning, "Prospect of 'massive' travel disruption intensifies as more unions ballot members and fuel protests clog main roads".

Hundreds of HGV lorry drivers led a "go slow" protest yesterday against rising fuel prices, blocking highways in England, Wales and Scotland. The action was organised independently of the trade unions, via social media, and was modelled on fuel protests by truck drivers in France. Tariq Akram, who led part of the blockade in South Yorkshire, told reporters, "Boris needs to be worried as the general public was supporting us. People got involved that we didn't expect to... People are saying thank you for doing it and standing up for us".

Several lorry drivers were arrested during yesterday's action, with Home Secretary Priti Patel demanding that police use new laws to arrest and detain lorry drivers who organised the protest.

The rail unions—and the entire TUC—are sitting on a social volcano. They are doing everything in their power to stem the tide of resistance, suppressing the growing demands for all-out strike action, including calls for a general strike.

The RMT issued a press statement today citing comments by General Secretary Mick Lynch making clear that Network Rail and the train operating companies are refusing to budge on the Johnson government's Thatcherite plans for Great British Railways. Lynch told the RMT's annual general meeting in Birmingham on Monday that following last month's strikes, "they have not diluted their stance. At Network Rail they are ramping up their demands.

"We went to the train operators, and they put on the table that virtually every rail worker would be re-contracted on a new contract of employment and a new set of terms and conditions.

"And they are going to bring back the Driver Only Operated disputes in every single train operating company. They have told me that face to face. They said it was their mandate from DfT [Department for Transport].

"So, this is as serious as it gets. It is the fight of our lifetime and of our generation."

Despite the Johnson government's offensive, Lynch has refused to set further strike dates. In an update to members last week, he declared, "This Union will not waste your energy and commitment to the cause so we

will take a disciplined and controlled approach to any industrial action."

Publicly, the rail unions are threatening to escalate industrial action. Lynch told members, "I sense that in the country as a whole there is a groundswell of renewed union activity that will continue to mount the pressure for a fair deal for all workers."

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan told the *Financial Times* it was "likely" that walkouts would be co-ordinated, declaring, "We believe [strikes] will have a massive effect" and adding, "There will be a summer of disruption".

But ASLEF has confirmed that drivers are being balloted separately, on a company-by-company basis, solely over pay, and says the current dispute is not over the broader agenda of Network Rail and the train operating companies to force through wholesale changes to jobs, terms and conditions.

Manuel Cortes, the TSSA's general secretary, has warned ministers to "take note" of workers' decision to strike, saying the strike vote by his members at Avanti was "only the beginning". Yet, like ASLEF, the TSSA has staggered strike ballots to prevent all-out combined action.

Conditions could not be more favourable to take on and defeat the Johnson government. A strike wave is emerging across the UK and Europe. The Tories are wracked by crisis, with Chancellor Rishi Sunak resigning from cabinet this afternoon alongside Health Secretary Sajid Javid. It is a government kept in power by Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party and the TUC.

Rail workers and the entire working class must intervene decisively through the formation of rank-and-file committees, coordinating a joint industrial and political movement to bring down the Tories. The dictates of a money-crazed financial oligarchy for wage cutting, price hikes, austerity and war, must be met with a mass movement of the working class, the expropriation of the billionaires and the fight for a workers' government and socialist policies, including public ownership of rail and transport.



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