

RMT union throws a lifeline to Johnson government with new rail strike schedule

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One day after announcing a 24-hour strike for July 27, the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union indicated Thursday that further action by its 40,000 members at Network Rail and 14 train operating companies would take place on August 18 and 20.

The union has thrown a lifeline to Boris Johnson's Tory government. After three days of strikes in the first round crippled the rail network for a week, the RMT has buried the dispute in talks with the employers for the best part of three weeks, limited the next action to a single day, and pushed the next dates far into next month.

Despite references to “coordinated” action, this is almost non-existent. Only members of the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association will join the RMT action on July 27. Train drivers' union ASLEF has called its strikes on July 16 and 23 for Hull Trains, July 23 for Greater Anglia and July 30 for Arriva Rail London, Chiltern Railways, Greater Anglia, Great Western, Hull Trains, LNER, Southeastern and West Midlands Trains.

Every union involved is stressing its reluctance to strike and pleading for a deal. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch pledged its readiness for “meaningful negotiations” with the employers and “urge[d] the companies to make improved proposals at the earliest opportunity.” ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan insisted that he and his fellow bureaucrats “don't want to strike” and that the union, “since I was elected GS in 2011, has only ever been on strike, until this year, for a handful of days.”

What limited action they have called is a desperate attempt to prompt the Tories and the rail companies to give them something, anything, behind which they can hide the sweeping concessions being demanded.

But the government and the employers have made clear they will not shift an inch from their plans to

implement an historic attack on the rail industry including the slashing of thousands of jobs, pensions, pay and conditions. After two weeks of negotiation, Network Rail made a new offer of a 4 percent rise in basic pay backdated to January for this year, 2 percent for next, an additional 2 percent conditional on productivity increases—all dependent on what Lynch called “drastic changes” in working conditions. The train operating companies have essentially not moved from their original position.

Beyond its specific objectives on the railways, the government wants to smash rail workers' resistance to set a demoralising example to the millions of other workers intent on strike action, and establish a benchmark for their increased exploitation—in the same way as the Thatcher government targeted the miners. It has passed laws enabling mass scabbing and is threatening to enforce draconian minimum service requirements to achieve this end.

Rail workers are in a powerful position to fight back but are being sabotaged by the unions. As Lynch acknowledges, the last round of strikes “brought the service to a standstill” and won wide popular support—“The public seem to be right behind us, many of the public are in the same position as our members.” Those three days of action gave the working class a sense of its enormous social power were it to be mobilised in an all-out struggle against the employers and the government.

This is what the RMT and ASLEF are working determinedly to prevent. Both reference ministers' intense interest in the dispute. Announcing the latest strikes, Lynch stated, “The public who will be inconvenienced by our strike action need to understand that it is the government's shackling of Network Rail and the TOCs that means the rail network will be shut

down for 24 hours.” Whelan said likewise that the train companies’ “hands have been tied by the government,” even threatening to take it to court for “breaking agreements on free collective bargaining” between the unions and the private operators.

But they deliberately do not draw the conclusion. Namely, that if the government is calling the shots, then it is the government as well as the employers which must be fought and defeated.

The conditions are the most favourable imaginable. Johnson’s administration is in meltdown, with Transport Secretary Grant Shapps one of the few ministers still standing after the unprecedented slew of resignations last week. Johnson himself is a lame duck, to be replaced in September. He leads possibly the most hated government in British history.

If the rail workers were to strike to bring down the Johnson government and bring an end to its slash and burn strategy in every industry, they would galvanise mass support in the working class. Instead, the RMT is working furiously to secure a deal, which, without workers inflicting a decisive defeat on their opponents, can only be a sell-out.

Lynch this week described as “progress” Network Rail’s offer of a two-year moratorium on compulsory redundancies. The company has already stated it expects to meet over 90 percent of its planned reductions with “voluntary” schemes agreed with the union.

As for its pay demand, the RMT has not set a figure, but Lynch described a recent 7 percent settlement at Merseyrail as an “impressive win” and proof that the union “can win decent pay rises on train operators when they are not under the auspices of the DfT and when free collective bargaining can take place.” The annual rate of inflation in May was 9.1 percent (CPI) and 11.7 percent (RPI).

Network Rail chief executive Andrew Haines has meanwhile made clear that whatever the company might offer in additional pay will be squeezed out of its employees through stepped-up exploitation.

Rail workers have delivered massive votes for strike action because they recognise a real fight is necessary to defend their interests. Given the chance, every other section of the working class is doing the same. The unions, presided over by the Trades Union Congress, are betraying this mandate, delaying, dividing, limiting

and cancelling strike action to avoid a situation which threatens the stability of the government. They act in concert with the Labour Party giving the Tories free rein in parliament to replace Johnson and his cabinet with a yet more right-wing setup.

Workers must break apart this conspiracy by taking the struggle into their own hands through the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every workplace. These committees can lead the fight for inflation-busting pay rises and to defeat all industry “restructurings” and “productivity drives” aimed at deepening workers’ exploitation, in connection with a political struggle to bring down the Johnson government and its Labour accomplices and end their policies of war, mass infection and social inequality.



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