UK: RMT agreement at Merseyrail paves the way for ending national rail strike

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Merseyrail has announced it will be running a limited service during next Wednesday's national strike by 40,000 rail workers. The one-day action by members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union follows three days of industrial action last month.

That strike brought the majority of the network to a standstill, including Merseyrail, and galvanised widespread support in the working class against the Tory government. Now Merseyrail, operated under franchise by Abellio and Serco and overseen by Labour Metro Mayor for Liverpool City Region Steven Rotheram, says it will be able to operate an hourly service between 7.30am and 6.30pm. Merseyrail runs services in Merseyside in the north west of England.

It is making full use of the strikebreaking operation mounted at a national level by the Conservative government with the drafting in of managers to operate the signalling system on Network Rail. This led to multiple safety breaches during last month's strike, which included trains leaving stations with signals on red and their wrong routing.

The door was opened to Rotheram and the private operators by the rail unions. During the national RMT strikes last month, the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) union announced a deal with Merseyrail for a below inflation 7.1 percent pay rise.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch promoted the pay award as an example of what could be achieved if the unions were allowed to negotiate with the employers without government interference. On July 14, the RMT pushed through its own deal with Merseyrail for the same amount, having agreed to downgrade the status of train guards the week before.

The *Liverpool Echo* reports that Merseyrail can run its service because "staff are part of a different union and are not involved in the dispute," suggesting TSSA members will be working. It is unclear whether RMT members will be told to work, but the fact remains that Merseyrail is their model.

Throughout the rail dispute, Lynch has appealed to the government to "unshackle" the employers so that deals can be reached with the unions. This has been coupled with a tireless effort to line the working class up behind the Labour Party, with Lynch insisting that its leader Sir Keir Starmer can come to the front of workers' struggles when he is in fact squarely on the opposing side.

The RMT's corporatist agenda and championing of Labour is designed to prevent the necessary mass mobilisation against the Tory government to defeat its sweeping plans for attacks on the rail network through its Great British Railways scheme, which the rail unions neglect to even mention.

This is in the face of a government onslaught on the working class. Last week the Johnson government introduced even tougher anti-strike laws allowing agency staff to be used as a scab force and increasing penalties for industrial action by up to £1 million. It plans to outlaw strikes on essential services. While aimed immediately at rail workers, these measures will be used more broadly as millions of workers push for a fight to defend their living and working conditions in the face of rampant inflation and exploitation.

Labour-run Merseyrail is the fruit of the RMT's campaign, as Lynch himself said in announcing the deal: "It is clear we can win decent pay rises on train operators when they are not under the auspices of the DfT [Department for Transport] and when free collective bargaining can take place."

The fact that this deal is presented as a model for the resolution of the national dispute is a stark warning. Any idea that an agreement at Merseyrail could secure

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jobs and conditions outside of a fight to defeat the government's drive to tear them up for near 40,000 other rail workers is divisive and a fraud. Behind the militant rhetoric, surrender terms have been offered.

The 7 percent pay agreement is a below inflation deal with CPI over 9 percent and RPI at almost 12 percent.

In relation to the agreement on the replacement of the safety critical guard, the RMT stated only, "hundreds of jobs have been secured." Lynch added, "We congratulate the dogged determination of our members to secure the crucial role of the onboard train manager."

This is misleading as the fight was specifically against the diminution of the role of the guard, now apparently replaced by that of "onboard train manager". The dispute is part of the national struggle against Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains, which has been the source of major opposition since 2016 with strike action by guards across the network. The RMT wore down the opposition and carved up the struggle, securing deals on a company-by-company basis which watered down the safety critical role.

At Merseyrail, guards took 16 days of industrial action in opposition to DOO's implementation but the RMT suspended any further action in 2019, agreeing in principle that the "design of the new trains proposes that the door control and dispatch of the trains will transfer to the driver."

This May, the guards rejected by 54.4 percent a final ultimatum from Merseyrail which the RMT National Executive had backed. On the pretext of no compulsory redundancies, the union was prepared to accept a two-tier pay system with existing guards transferred to the new job role on a salary of £31,000 while new entrants would receive just £27,000. In another major concession, it agreed that keeping the second safety critical person on the train would be self-funded at the expense of workers' wages based on a five-year pay deal with two years of pay freezes.

Whatever modifications have been made to finally get the agreement through, against determined resistance from workers, the RMT has achieved the overarching aim of management to downgrade the role of guards in a further step towards DOO.

The unions are attempting to police and discipline a growing insurgency of the working class by neutering the strikes they have been forced to call.

Action in the national dispute by the RMT this month has been limited to a single day, with the next strike dates pushed back to August 18 and 20.

Thousands of train drivers across eight train operating companies represented by ASLEF have voted for strike action—the first national strike of drivers since 1995—but this has been set for three days after the RMT action on July 30. ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan has emphasised the union's aversion to strike action, pointing to its record under his leadership: "since I was elected GS in 2011, [ASLEF] has only ever been on strike, until this year, for a handful of days."

The only action which will coincide with that of the RMT next Wednesday is that called by TSSA, at a single company, Avanti West Coast—the union has yet to announce strikes dates at Network Rail and six other train operating companies.

Rail workers have delivered massive votes for strike action because they recognise a real fight is necessary to defend their interests. Provided with the opportunity, other sections of the working class are doing the same. The unions are either suspending strikes to block co-ordinated action on the buses as is the case with Unite, or delaying strike action after being handed resounding mandates as with the Communication Workers Union at BT and Royal Mail—all to prevent any threat to the stability of the government. They act in tandem 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 the defeat of all "restructurings" of terms and conditions, 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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