

UK rail and BT telecoms workers to strike this week

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More than 40,000 rail workers will strike on Wednesday. Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) will take action across 14 train operating companies and the whole of Network Rail—their fourth strike day after an earlier round in June. This time they will be joined by members of the clerical TSSA union at the Avanti West Coast operator.

Rail workers are determined to fight Conservative government-imposed plans for sweeping attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. But this is being deliberately sabotaged by the rail unions.

Despite overwhelming votes for action by 5,500 train drivers represented by ASLEF across eight train companies, unified action is being prevented. ASLEF members are due to walk out separately on Saturday.

Since the RMT dispute first began, the union has been engaged in constant negotiations with the employers. After the first three days of strikes in June, any discussion of further action was sidelined as the RMT complained repeatedly that if only the government would “unshackle” the employers, then a deal could be struck. ASLEF has likewise insisted the train companies’ “hands have been tied by the government.”

The transparent lie of “unnecessary interference” obscures the essential truth that rail workers are in a political fight with the government, which has made clear from the outset that its aim is to inflict a crushing defeat to impose its reprivatisation agenda through the Great British Railways scheme and to set an example for the millions of workers also seeking a fightback in their industries.

If rail workers do not take up a conscious struggle against the government, then they face being led into a devastating defeat. Not only will they suffer a de-facto pay cut, but the Tories will carry through the

destruction of thousands of jobs, including the closure of ticket offices and elimination of the safety critical role of train guards in favour of unskilled revenue collection, and a devastating assault on pensions.

Even amid the crisis surrounding the removal of Boris Johnson as Tory leader, the government has deepened its offensive—passing legislation enabling large-scale scabbing operations and increasing potential fines on unions to £1 million.

It has also imposed massive de facto pay cuts across the public sector and made even these below-inflation “raises” dependent on spending cuts. Questioned on the pay deals, Chief Secretary to the Treasury Simon Clarke told BBC Radio’s *Today* programme, “I would say what Margaret Thatcher said which is that ‘there is no alternative’.” Asked if that meant, “if you have to face strikes, so be it?” Clarke replied, “That is absolutely correct.”

Clarke is being tipped as either chancellor or business secretary under the runaway favourite to replace Johnson as prime minister, Liz Truss.

The RMT’s strategy of limited industrial action to force a negotiated settlement by Network Rail and the train operating companies has not produced a single concession.

Last Friday, the union sent a message to members admitting that its negotiating partners have not budged an inch. It states, “The offer from Train Operating Companies amounts to a proposal for pay cuts and the ransacking of the rail industry with wholesale loss of jobs and the smashing of hard-won conditions.” Attacks include “the closure of ticket offices” and extension of driver only operation and an undertaking on job security which is “not meaningful and does not provide a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies.”

The RMT knows that a deep well of anger is

developing among its members and is stepping up its militant rhetoric. Having felt forced to call an additional two days of strikes in August, it now says in its letter that its national executive committee will “consider further strike dates” and “the General Secretary [Mick Lynch] is instructed to discuss the potential for coordinating our action with other trade unions in dispute or entering dispute at this time.”

But the union bureaucracy cannot be trusted to make good on any of these deliberately vague promises of unified action. There has not even been a joint statement issued by the RMT, TSSA and ASLEF on this week’s strikes, let alone addressing the 40,000 BT workers represented by the Communication Workers Union set to go out on Friday and next Monday.

The fightback against attacks on the rail industry cannot be left in the hands of the unions. Workers know the all-out struggle that must be waged and have voted for it in overwhelming numbers. Now they must take up its organisation and leadership, against the sabotage attempts of the RMT, ASLEF and TSSA. The mechanisms for doing so are rank-and-file committees, run independently of the unions by workers who refuse to let them dictate events.

These committees must base their programme of action on the fact that workers are involved in a political struggle. Jobs, wages and conditions face decimation in order to feed the insatiable drive for profits of the super-rich and the deepening war with Russia in Ukraine.

This means breaking free from the shackles of the Labour Party, which fully supports the Tory government’s policies of war, mass infection and social counter-revolution and refuses to fight for its removal.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer prepared for this next round of rail strikes by repeating his insistence that Labour MPs stay away from picket lines. During the RMT strikes last month, he threatened to discipline MPs who did so.

The party, he told *Sky News* last Friday, “have to get in the mindset of being in government” which “means you don’t want strikes to happen.”

“You can’t have a Cabinet meeting, and then go out onto the picket line,” he added.

He completed his audition before the big banks and corporations by delivering a speech on the economy Monday, promising “sound finances, careful

spending,” “no magic-money-tree economics” and every other euphemism for austerity. He pledged to “work in partnership with business” and “not to hark back to our old ideas” but instead to “care as much about growth and productivity as we have done in the past about redistribution and investment.”

Starmer has accused Tory leadership contenders Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak of staging a “Thatcherite cosplay,” but he is as much of a Thatcherite as they are. Between them, Labour and the Tories are conspiring to enforce an unprecedented attack on workers’ living standards.

The unions insist that Labour are “what we’ve got,” in the words of Mick Lynch, and must be supported. Lynch has said repeatedly, “I want a Labour government” and “I want [Starmer] to be prime minister.”

But this is unacceptable to the millions of workers having their household budgets savaged by inflation, their jobs threatened, and bodies sickened and broken by every more ruthless exploitation in the workplace and reinfections with COVID.

The Socialist Equality Party is working for a combined “industrial and political offensive by the British working class centred on challenging the right of the parties of big business to rule,” calling for an immediate general election to halt the Tory-Labour conspiracy and a general strike organised by rank-and-file committees to assert the social interests of the working class.

We call on rail and all other workers to contact the SEP today and take up this programme in their depots, factories, warehouses, shops and offices.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact