

UK: RMT threatens general strike against Tory anti-strike charter amid escalating rail dispute

Thomas Scripps
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Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) General Secretary Mick Lynch warned of a general strike after the Conservative government responded to industrial action by over 44,000 rail workers with a threat to ban strikes in essential services.

Members of the RMT held another strong day of strike action Wednesday, joined this time by members of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) at train operator Avanti West Coast. More RMT strikes are planned for August 18 and 20, and these will be held jointly with thousands of TSSA members across seven train operating companies. London Underground workers represented by the RMT will strike August 19. Around 6,000 train drivers represented by the ASLEF union are due to strike this Saturday at seven operators and again on August 13 at nine.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps responded Tuesday night by publishing, “My prescription for an end to rail strike chaos” in the *Daily Telegraph*. Threatening, “We must make union barons think twice before wielding the strike weapon—and complete Margaret Thatcher’s unfinished business,” Shapps set out a list of draconian anti-strike laws—“as many as 16 measures” to stop “brutal” strikes.

Noting the government has already quadrupled the fine for “unlawful strikes” to £1 million and enacted legislation for mass agency worker scabbing operations, Shapps insisted “more is needed.”

This would include “banning strikes by different unions in the same workplace within a set period”, implementing “an absolute limit of six pickets at points of Critical National Infrastructure”, outlawing what he calls “intimidatory language”, interfering in the language used on union ballot papers and delaying

strikes with a “right to respond” time for the employer.

The Tories would also scrap the law allowing unions to make use of a strike mandate at any point in the next six months: “each single, continuous bout of strike action should be justified by its own ballot. We should also be looking at compulsory cooling-off periods after each strike, lasting up to 60 days.” He would increase ballot thresholds for strike action and double the minimum notice period for the employers from two weeks to four.

Shapps raised the government’s already-planned measure of enforcing minimum service levels in “critical industries”, which runaway favourite to replace Boris Johnson as prime minister Liz Truss promises to enact within the first 30 days of her administration, along with limiting the number of strikes allowed within a six-month period and scrapping tax-free payments to striking workers.

Truss and leadership rival Rishi Sunak have in fact both said they will ban strikes on essential public services, with Truss railing Wednesday that she would “take a tough line on trade union action that is not helping people get on in life.” Lynch replied that he would campaign for the calling of a general strike if Truss became prime minister in September committed to these policies.

“The proposals by Liz Truss amount to the biggest attack on trade union and civil rights since labour unions were legalised in 1871. Truss is proposing to make effective trade unionism illegal in Britain and to rob working people of a key democratic right,” he said. “If these proposals become law, there will be the biggest resistance mounted by the entire trade union movement, rivalling the general strike of 1926, the

suffragettes and Chartism.”

However, he was careful to say that the decision was “up to others” who he knows would never take such action: “only the TUC [Trades Union Congress] can call a general strike”. TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady said only that “threatening the right to strike tilts the balance of power too far towards employers” and refused to comment on the issue of a general strike.

Lynch’s threats are belied by the RMT’s own conduct of the current rail strikes. He repeated the union’s insistence that “it’s not our ambition to just have industrial action on a long-term basis. We’re looking for a settlement and we’re looking for a resolution to the problems we’ve got on the railway.”

But whatever Lynch’s political calculations, the issue of a general strike is posed directly before the working class. The Tory government has made clear that it intends to inflict a crushing defeat on rail workers, declaring open season on their wages, jobs, pensions and conditions and opening the door to an assault on the entire working class that it has now laid out in detail.

The Tories want to ramp up workers’ exploitation to fund Britain’s participation in the NATO war against Russia and secure the profits of the super-rich amid a spiralling economic crisis and the long-term decline of the British economy.

Continued and coordinated action, coupled with a political programme for the bringing down of the government and enforcing of workers’ social interests, is required to defeat this savage offensive. But the rail unions are tying workers’ hands, seeking a resolution through talks with the employers that only pave the way to defeat.

As far as the RMT has a political strategy, it is to boost the Labour Party. Lynch again called on Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer to “identify with working class people’s struggles”, “ride this wave of solidarity that we’re getting” and “bring balance to our society and rebalance our economy.”

This is said as Starmer is operating in a united front with the Tory Party against the rail strikes. He once again decreed that members of his front bench should not attend picket lines, telling senior MPs, “The Labour Party in opposition needs to be the Labour Party in power. And a government doesn’t go on picket lines, a government tries to resolve disputes.”

When Shadow Transport Secretary Sam Tarry defied the order, Shapps commented, “He is clearly in direct defiance of Sir Keir Starmer. No doubt he’ll want to remove him from his job.” Starmer sacked Tarry this evening. A Labour spokesperson said, “As a government in waiting, any breach of collective responsibility is taken extremely seriously and for these reasons Sam Tarry has been removed from the frontbench.”

According to unnamed sources speaking to the *Guardian*, Labour cited Tarry’s comments that it was “not acceptable to offer below inflation pay rises” because it would be a real-terms pay cut for workers as the reason he was singled out for defying party policy.

Tarry refused to criticise Starmer even in his statement acknowledging his sacking. He had stated on the picket line in the morning that if Labour were in government, “RMT members and TSSA members would not be on strike today. Because we would have been round the table. We’d have sorted this out.”

This is the line of Labour’s “left”, most clearly articulated by Jeremy Corbyn ally and former shadow chancellor John McDonnell, of pursuing the same agenda as the Tory Party but through direct negotiations with the unions to help them keep a grip on an angry working class.

But Starmer has made the character of his party clear to everyone. It would respond to the necessary all-out political fight against the Tory government by aligning itself fully behind Truss, Sunak, Shapps and company.

The TUC cannot be trusted to lead such a fight against the government under any circumstances. It is up to workers to organise their own struggle. Rank-and-file committees should be established in every workplace, independent of the unions, to agitate for and organise coordinated action and a general strike, while pushing for an immediate general election to halt the Tory-Labour conspiracy against the working class in its tracks.



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