Striking UK rail workers: “They are taking away workers’ voices. It’s going to a dictatorship”

Our reporters
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Members of the Socialist Equality Party visited rail workers pickets across the UK yesterday, distributing leaflets calling for a political struggle against the Johnson government.

There was wide-ranging discussion on the strategy needed to defeat the government’s assault on rail workers, as well as the Labour Party’s role in denouncing the strikes. A selection of interviews is published below, with more to follow.

At Stonebridge Park Depot in Wembley, London Andy said, “We haven’t had a pay-rise for over two years, and they’ve used COVID as an excuse. During COVID, they changed our working pattern to keep the country moving.”

Andy’s colleague Perfiz added, “We didn’t work any less. If they needed us, we came in for extra shifts to get the job done and cover for people who caught COVID, or because they were shielding. The company said, ‘We’re going to look after you’, but then they changed things, like with our annual leave. It’s like they forgot that we worked through COVID.

“We didn’t make any demands at that time. We worked without a pay rise until now. The union said that everyone is under austerity conditions because of COVID, working extra hours and so on. But now it’s like we don’t deserve it. Our managing director just got a £36K pay rise in April. How he can get that, and we don’t get anything?”

Andy continued, “We’re the front line. We’re the ones that make the trains move, so without us everything stops. A colleague and a friend died from COVID. He was very particular about cleaning, he’d clean everything. There has been no change in working practices really.

Perfiz said, “We would love coordinated strikes. We went out last time on June 21, and the Underground came out with us, London was shut down. We would love them [trade unions] to do things like that, but it’s dealt with on a national level. I don’t know why they don’t do that.

“For the RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport union], the strike today is very strategic, as the Commonwealth Games start today in Birmingham. So the RMT decided not to disrupt it. At the end of the day we are preventing our company from making money because they’re not giving us a pay rise. But we’re not there to upset the public.

“The media have portrayed that we don’t have any public support, but that’s not true. The public believe that we should get a pay rise, and the media are trying to make out that we don’t deserve a pay rise. But as our reps have said, everyone deserves a pay rise!”

Andy added, “There’s a postal worker here who won’t cross the picket line. A manager said to us why aren’t you letting our drivers through, and we pointed out it was his choice, he’s not crossing the picket line.

“We get paid the least amount of money, but we oversee people’s lives! It’s a safety critical job. We have people’s lives in our hands every day, so we need to know what we are doing. Why shouldn’t we be paid for that?”

Perfiz responded, “I know that in half an hour there’s going to be people working in that signal box that are not safety trained and have not been updated on their rules in 5/6 years, and they’re in their risking people’s lives with rudimentary skills. A lot of the maintenance that needed to be done last time couldn’t get done because the people that were there didn’t have the ability to move the trains to allow them to do the maintenance. It’s really terrible. This is costing the company a lot of money, and this could have all been averted by giving us a pay rise.”

At **Sheffield railway station** a picketing train guard explained, “While the government is leading these talks, we’re not getting anywhere. There’ll be a loss of all the ticket offices and with that goes passenger assistance for vulnerable people and any basic presence on stations. On the Network Rail side, they’ve already started redundancy proceedings in the thousands. So, we’ve got to keep campaigning and fighting, because if we don’t fight now then it’ll all be lost.

“You can see by the support we’ve got on our pickets from members of the public that people are behind us. If those unions which did have a strike mandate had coordinated action it would be a good thing.”

He described the Conservative Party leadership contest contenders for prime minister, Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss, as “very right-wing. They hammer on easy targets, trying to put the blame for things on immigration, and they’re going for China. Then there’s the anti-strike legislation. If they bring in essential services laws to ban strikes on rail, it’ll be the buses next, then post offices, telecommunications, internet providers and anybody else they can say is essential. Before you know it, the right to strikes is gone, and that is really the only form of defence that working people have got.”

Responding to the fact that 120,000 Tory party members will decide who is the next prime minister, the picket said, “There should be a general election, but I also think that the Labour front bench needs to start supporting what the working class are doing. [Party leader Sir] Keir Starmer should pull his finger out and appeal to the people who are balloting for strikes in this country

“This is the problem. There doesn’t appear to be any viable party for working class people. It’s been building up for years, and it’s gone on for that long that you’ve got a couple of generations that have not had any rights in the workplace.

“You’ve got inflation going up massively. We’ve had a three-year pay freeze and in those three years inflation must have gone up 20 percent, as a minimum. Our standard of living’s gone down by nearly a quarter, and everything’s still going up. Energy bills will go up again in autumn. But there is a mood of resistance, and since we balloted the number of people that have balloted in different sectors and the results that have come back are massively for striking. You’d think that the Labour Party would have

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got behind it and then we could have pushed for a general election, but they are hostile to their own."

At Network Rail's **Longsight Overhead Line depot in Manchester** there was discussion about proposed legislation attacking the right to strike. John told WSWS, "The government are trying to silence us. They are trying to do away with democracy. They are taking away workers' voices. It's going to a dictatorship.

"If they bring in contract labour against the strike, the first thing it does is put all passengers at risk. They are trying to replace the skills we have and bring in cheap labour through the back door. By the sounds of it, they don't want any of us on day shifts and want us on permanent nights. So, there's no 24-hour cover in case anything goes wrong."

Alan said, "[Transport Secretary] Grant Shapps has said we're selfish and shouldn't be striking but the government won't even come to the table.

"We used to get an annual bonus and that got taken away during COVID. It was a maximum of up to £1,400, so it was an incentive. But managers at the top were still getting their pay rises and bonuses during COVID.

"There's no recognition for what we have done, they are just saying like it or lump it in terms of the modernisation they want. When they say modernisation that means reducing staff numbers. They are calling what they want 'risk based-maintenance'. In terms of maintenance, prevention is better than cure."

Condemning Labour's opposition to their strike, John said, "They are just trying to silence working people. The Tories and Labour are against the strikes. If Labour came out and said they back us, and with the amount of backing we have from the public, Labour would win a landslide in a general election."

Alan commented, "That's why Labour never won the last election. It's leaving working class voters without a party."

Asked what he thought would happen next in the dispute, Alan said "The talks broke down last week and it looks like Network Rail will try to just implement what they want and then the dispute will really escalate."

Southwest Railway guard Ron said, "Inflation is hitting everybody's pocket. We haven't had a pay rise in over two years. We would like a decent pay raise to reflect the increase in the cost of living we're experiencing.

"The government is trying to frame it as purely a pay increase dispute, but it's not just that. It's obviously terms and conditions. The RMT has fought hard for conditions to be as they are today, and to have the government come in and try to reduce those conditions, not give us a pay raise and also cut back on safety, I think it's disgusting really.

"A general strike is maybe where it ends up. Everyone is experiencing degradation in their income, and sky-high taxes that we've got currently. I'm hoping that maybe this will change the government. Obviously, we are coming out approaching another general election, and I think the Tories will have a big shock this time.

"The Tories and the Labour Party are very close. There is not much between them, really. I think more parties in our general election system would be better for us, more socialists, give people more of a choice. Unfortunately, we don't have much of a choice; it's two wings of the same bird.

"If workers come together, they'd be surprised by how much power they actually have. Unfortunately, just the way the living conditions are at the moment, people struggling to survive, sometimes the political process, especially to the working class, feels a bit isolated. Hopefully the strength you've seen today on the picket line here demonstrates that there are people out there to go out on strike and defend their conditions."

At **Wakefield Westgate, in West Yorkshire**, Kevin who is a train guard said, "The Tories are the cause of this problem. I hate the Tories with a passion as my mum died of cancer during lockdown while those bastards partied, and I wasn't allowed to be with her in Somerset to see her die in her deathbed. She was denied cancer saving drugs because the local health authority wasn't funded properly

"I think the Tories want to use the railways as their Maggie Thatcher moment against the unions when we're just sticking up for our livelihoods. It's not just about money, it's about the safety of passengers. Me being an onboard train guard, they want to get rid of me. When you've got an elderly relative that wants to get help on the train there's no station staff. On the train there's sometimes a medical emergency and on a driver only train they are not going to stop to deal with it.

"If you've got people on the train kicking off like you do now, out to cause trouble especially on a Friday or a Saturday night, if I'm not on the train who's going to deal with that? Even worse if there's an accident on the railway. The driver cops it in an accident and there's no one on that train to take control of the safety of passengers."

"There needs to be a coordinated action with all the unions coming together and we need a general strike. If the bankers can get bonuses for sending this country like it is why can't the workers who make all this money for the bosses get a fair pay rise?

"This strike's not about pay but protecting all our rights as railway staff. Our pensions are under threat and our jobs, terms and conditions are under threat. They are trying to destroy the working class to make sure it doesn't have a voice anymore and control them. It's going into a fascist state in this country. Look at Sri Lanka, look at what they did. Why can't we as a country all rise up and stand up and do it?"

At **London's Waterloo station** a guard of 17 years said, "The business is making money. Last year they made £800 million but the money is going to the shareholders. In view of this, we think we deserve a fair raise. They are also pushing 'modernisation', which is going to affect jobs, cutting ticket offices, and expecting us to take more responsibility, more work than what we're doing now, for less pay. We've made enough sacrifices.

"The government's cut billions from local councils and services, they close schools and other things, and it's the poorest who feel it most. Then, when the banks go into crisis, there's billions and money appears. When COVID comes, billions for business comes from nowhere. The most essential people in British society are the workers. But the wealth divide is getting wider and wider. We're getting more support and solidarity."

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