

Workers speak from UK rail strike picket lines: “You get walked over, and you can only take so much”

Our reporters
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Members of the Socialist Equality Party visited rail workers’ pickets across the UK on Wednesday, with strikers voicing their determination to oppose the government’s attacks on their jobs and livelihoods.

At **King’s Cross/St Pancras station**, London North Eastern Railway (LNER) worker Amanda said there was growing public support for the strikes. Workers from all over the world, including Germany and Turkey, had come to the picket lines.

“I can be doing my job and people just come up to me out of the blue and say ‘You know what? Just stick to it, you’re doing a good job.’ I can’t believe how much support we have had from the public.”

Discussing a general strike, Amanda said, “If we’re not successful, it will need to escalate, because something has to be done. Our voice must be heard.”

Amanda stressed the safety issues involved in the strike. “To cut down so you’ve just got a train driver on a train if you’re travelling 4-5 hours you need extra people on that train in case there’s an incident. You never know what’s going to happen. You need to cover that safely.”

She cited a recent incident where a passenger had missed his stop and was without his necessary medication on a train made up of two coupled but separate services. Amanda and the train manager on the other train looked after the passenger, sought medical assistance and sorted out replacement medication.

Amanda said that workers everywhere are facing the same crisis. “Everybody’s struggling. No matter what you earn, most people haven’t had a pay rise for three years. We’re having a pay cut because of inflation. So we’re all worse off than we were. Working people are looking and they’re thinking ‘We know where you’re coming from,’ because most people are in the same boat.

“You get walked over, and you can only take so much. It gets to a certain level, and you think, ‘You know what? We can’t do this anymore.’ This isn’t progress, the way we’re getting treated as workers.”

At London’s **Euston station**, Alan said, “I’m on the picket today because I want to fight for my future as does everyone.

“We’re in a massive battle now against companies that are

being controlled by a Tory government who want to inflict an austerity agenda across the public sector.

“The rail industry is being threatened with thousands of redundancies. This will put the safety, not only of rail workers, but of the wider public making use of the services, at risk.

“They want to inflict very dangerous changes to our terms and conditions, including reducing our work/life balance as well as working practices.”

Alan said he supported “co-ordinated united action with different unions organising their workers in industries they represent.

“In terms a potential for a general strike the CWU, Royal Mail workers, were balloted last week on a 77 percent turnout of which 97 percent of those voted in favour of strike action.

“People are really relating to the issues we’re facing. We are setting a precedent for hundreds and thousands of workers and their unions to say, ‘Enough is enough’. To demonstrate to this Tory government that we’re not here to just make up the numbers in the workforce.

“We’re going to stand up for what we deserve, and what we earn. We serve the public and we’re going to make sure that we’re still here to serve them in as safe a way as possible while earning a deserved pay rise, having worked through the pandemic and now enduring the worst cost of living crisis in living memory.”

He said of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who told his MPs not to visit picket lines, “He needs to tell us and the public which side is he on. Nobody knows what the Labour Party stands for these days. I heard [Shadow Chancellor] Rachel Reeves yesterday say categorically they will not be re-nationalising rail, water or energy. That proves Starmer lied to get elected in April 2020. I heard [Labour MP] Davis Lammy a few weeks ago saying it doesn’t look responsible for a party wanting to be in government to be on a picket line.

“I don’t think they stand up for working people.”

Alan said the message he wanted to send to workers in every country was “solidarity to all workers who stand up to the bourgeois class. Never ever feel inferior because that’s how they want you to feel, it’s their agenda. They want to make life

as difficult for workers as possible. Don't let that ever be the case."

A platform worker at **Bristol Parkway** spoke about the danger to the public of the government's plans to use agency staff instead of fully trained safety critical rail staff.

"You've got agency staff working on trains, working as guards. It takes months to train and obviously it's not safe.

"For a conductor to learn their job, they're training takes a minimum six months. They're learning the routes, learning how to operate trains, they're shadowing and learning the job. For a manager to learn to work a train it takes five days.

"My job on the platform, my training's shorter, but minimum it's a month's shadowing and then a week's training course. For a manager, it takes two days.

"Passenger safety's being put at risk. It's not wise, all the cuts they want to make with Network Rail track workers. At the end of the day, it's safety. These people who are out at night working on the tracks, working hard jobs, they're skilled workers and they're trying to get rid of all of them. All while they're still making loads of profits."

Asked what the main issues were in the dispute, the worker said, "For me personally, the issue is job security and keeping the ticket offices. There are so many people that don't use technology and it's not fair [to close the ticket offices].

"It's public transport and there are so many people who don't know how to use their phones and there are issues with e-tickets and there are elderly people that live on their own that don't have the technology to get e-tickets. For them it's quite nice to go and stand in the ticket office and chat to someone and it's done properly, and they don't have any issues.

"For people that buy these e-tickets from third party companies, if there are issues, there is nothing we can do for them at the station. But if you buy a ticket at the station, at the ticket office, they can refund it and reissue the correct ticket."

Speaking about the stresses facing rail workers, he said, "People don't realise how much overtime we do, and I know people would argue that's a benefit. But we're so short of staff if we don't work overtime that our colleagues are getting left in situations where they are having to work alone when there should be two people at all times. I'm not going to leave one of my colleagues alone running the station."

"There's lots of support for us and a lot of people saying 'good luck'. We have to keep striking. That's all we can do."

At **Bristol Temple Meads station**, Gerard, a railway worker of 20 years, said, "I'm here to support my colleagues. The strike is important to us. They're [the government] looking at ticket office closures and undermining the entire railway. They keep saying the finances aren't there, but they waste so much money on other things. If it were structured properly, there would be enough money to support the railways properly and to keep the offices open, to support all of the staff, and with the cost of living increases to make sure that everybody has a decent working wage."

Gerard explained that he had seen a lot of changes. "When I first started, I was in the ticket office, so I understand the ticket side of it. When I started, there were dedicated managers in the ticket offices, there were several line supervisors. Over time, that's been eroded away. There's no dedicated manager. You just have a couple of supervisors doing the job. Where there used to be two or three people, there's now one person. Those kind of pressures are impacting on everybody, all of the industry."

The Conservative government was trying to "railroad their agenda onto us. To take away the workers' rights." Rail workers' pay was being kept down but the government "squander billions, as we've seen with COVID and everything else. When Conservative Party leadership candidate Rishi Sunak wants to find money for something... there's loads of money in the pot. But when it comes to people on the front line, people who are working, what do the doctors and the nurses get? A clap! That doesn't pay the bills. Unfortunately, the way that the government runs is they do it for their profit and for themselves, and they take advantage of the people who are just trying to make a living and pay taxes into the government.

"The union is willing to discuss and to talk it through. It just seems that the government has its own agenda of what it wants to do and it doesn't want to listen to our side.

"The cost of petrol, electricity and other things is driving people to this situation. In real terms, people's pay has gone down 10 percent. The cost of everything has gone up, but they don't want to pay people a decent wage anymore. They want to take, take, take, but not give anything in return.

"I think there needs to be a general election... What needs to happen is a new government to be formed from a general election and hopefully we can get the right people in positions."



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