

UK train drivers strike brings rail services to a halt

Robert Stevens
31 July 2022

Thousands of train driver at seven of England's 15 train operating companies held a one-day strike Saturday paralysing much of the UK's rail network.

Drivers are demanding a pay increase following a three year pay freeze. Workers voted by large majorities to strike after the government and companies agreed that drivers should receive no more than a two percent pay increase, massively below the RPI measure of inflation which is almost 12 percent. Further offers by Network Rail have been based on rail workers accepting a still well-below inflation higher pay deal tied to attacks on working conditions—which the government demands are imposed as part of its Great British Railway plans.

Services were hit at Arriva Rail London, Chiltern Railways, Greater Anglia, Great Western, Hull Trains, LNER, Southeastern and West Midlands Trains. Very few or no services were able to run. Heathrow Express trains were brought to a complete halt as was Southeastern. On GWR, no service was able to run west of Bristol into Wales. The disruption to West Midlands Trains heavily hit services in Birmingham, the host city of the Commonwealth Games, impacting the tournament.

The response of the government was to double down on efforts to impose a devastating defeat on drivers and all rail workers. In a *Times* opinion piece, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps denounced drivers as “aristocrats of the public sector” doing “their best to bring the country to a standstill” and “derailing trips to the Women’s Euros [football tournament] and Commonwealth Games.”

He warned that Network Rail will move to impose the changes without workers’ consent, declaring, “RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport union] is stalling on reform and Aslef is dragging its feet in negotiations

while both call more strikes. Enough.

“This week Network Rail, the biggest rail employer, which runs the infrastructure, sent a letter to the unions commencing formal consultation on modernisation... despite the stonewalling, changes will be introduced regardless.” His comment concluded, “This is not brinkmanship. We have to grip this situation and force through necessary change.”

The claim by Shapps that unions are intransigent in opposing the government is propaganda aimed at the Tory’s right-wing base to justify a raft of draconian anti-strike laws being prepared.

The reality is that the unions are doing everything to end the strikes, with the RMT set to hold just two days of national strikes in August (August 18 and 20) and ASLEF just one day (August 13). The unions refuse to call co-ordinated strikes of all rail workers, despite them confronting the same attacks from employers.

The Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA), which has around 2,000 members among the 20,000 striking at Network Rail, announced last Thursday it would put a revised 8 percent pay offer to a ballot of its members. The *Times* revealed, “The proposed deal included a 4 percent rise backdated to January. This would be followed by another 2 percent next year. The final 2 percent was conditional on ‘modernisation milestones’, such as changes in working practices.”

Just 24 hours later the union was forced to abandon its planned climbdown, with TSSA general secretary Manuel Cortes claiming, “Network Rail then went on to present to us yesterday [last Friday] something that was significantly different to what we understood their offer to be. We can’t negotiate in good faith if Network Rail keeps shifting the goalposts.”

There is nothing to negotiate, with the government’s line fully in sync with Network Rail outlined by Shapps

on Saturday. Their agenda, including compulsory redundancies and a rock bottom pay deal will be imposed by force.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to rail workers during Saturday's strike. Glen, on the picket line at Doncaster station, is employed by LNER has been a driver for over 20 years. He said, "I reckon because inflation's so high we're not getting a pay rise. The government's been after us for years, it's another miners' strike isn't it? They think we're too big for our own boots and they want to knock us down.

"We've had a mini recession during COVID where all the trains are rented costing hundreds of millions of pounds. They made us run during COVID which we did and didn't complain. We didn't ask for a pay rise last year because we know not many people had travelled and 'we're all in it together'. Then this year senior managers have all had a big pay rise, a big bonus for this Great British Railways and 'we're not in it together'.

"The company's just pissed everyone off. They keep going on about the £16 billion they've pumped into railways. Most of that has been taken out by the private train companies like Hitachi. The trains don't belong to us, they are rented every month and Hitachi is still going to want to get paid rental whether we use them or not.

"We haven't took all this money out, it's what the government assigned to these private companies and we're paying for it.

"They say if we get a pay rise it's going to stoke inflation. It's not us, it's the cost of diesel, gas and electric. All companies are manufacturing foods and delivery and we're getting shafted for it. Something needs doing.

"Every walk of life is affected. I've got a family who work for the council... They've not had pay rises for about 10 years or 1 or 2 percent.

"The government wants to see us all on minimum wage and benefits. The news wants to build up negativity towards all these strikes and want to turn people against us. But the public feels the same because everyone's struggling and people are panicking how they are going to pay their gas and electric bills. They are saying it's going to cost £500 just for next January alone. It's sinking into people they need a change."

At Piccadilly station in Manchester, WSWS reporters

spoke to rail workers in the RMT. ASLEF drivers did not strike on Saturday, as the union, as part of its divide and rule agenda, is still balloting its members in the northwest region.

An ASLEF driver rushing to board his train said, "My personal opinion is everyone should be out. They've tried putting us against nurses and it's massively backfired. How can anyone take our rights to strike away? I'm for a general strike all over."

Customer service rail worker Angie said, "I'm leaving, because the basic salary we get isn't enough for the anti-social hours we're expected to do. It doesn't allow for a healthy work-life balance. You've got to do such a lot of training for this job. You've got to be ready for all eventualities, people don't understand that."

John, a security worker, said, "I'm for a general strike. The Tories are so incompetent. There's no blueprint for the Great British Railways plan, but I do know they're going to cut maintenance by 50 percent. It's about profiteering.

"I'm for socialist ideas, on healthcare, everyone has a right to life."

Hamid, a customer service worker, had spoken to the WSWS the previous week. He took copies of a WSWS article, "RMT union throws lifeline to Johnson government with new rail strike schedule" to distribute among workmates. He said, "The unions are supposed to represent you and your interests, but they've got their own agenda. It will go down the route of the American unions, in bed with the companies. When I read your article, it seems like strikes will be banned soon. No-one told us about this, people here said 'I didn't know that.' The union's not telling us that, it should be in big bold letters.

"Labour are worse than the Tories, [Labour leader Sir Keir] Starmer sacked that guy (Sam Tarry MP) for going on an RMT picket line. The infrastructure needs to be renationalised and the National Health Service looked after properly."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact