Train drivers hold 24-hour UK-wide strike as Aslef union offers to accept real-terms pay cuts

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Thousands of train drivers held their second national stoppage of the summer Saturday, disrupting passenger services nationwide.

The first strike by drivers was held at seven of England's 15 train operating companies on July 31.

Drivers are demanding a pay increase following a three-year-long freeze. Workers voted by large majorities to strike after the government and companies agreed that drivers should receive 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 workers accepting a still well-below-inflation higher pay deal tied to attacks on working conditions—which the government demands be imposed as part of its Great British Railway plans.

The latest 24-hour stoppage hit nine operating companies, halting services in many parts of England, Scotland and Wales. Avanti West Coast, CrossCountry, Greater Anglia, Great Western Railway, Hull Trains, LNER, London Overground, Southeastern and West Midlands Trains were all hit.

The determination of drivers to fight for a wage increase is at odds with the union leadership, which is seeking a sellout compromise.

Every effort is being made by Aslef—and the main rail union, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT)—to prevent their members organising a united offensive. Throughout the summer, the two unions have held no joint action, with Aslef General Secretary Mick Whelan declaring in July, as his members voted overwhelmingly to strike, "There's no reason why we'd call them all out together…"

Aslef announced as the latest strike began that further actions could occur on Chiltern Railways, Northern Trains and TransPennine Express, as these firms "are yet to negotiate with Aslef… Ballots close on the potential action on the 25 August."

The likelihood is that any strike mandate by drivers at those firms will be suppressed by Aslef as it seeks to impose a rotten agreement.

On Friday, the *i* news site reported a source at Aslef saying that strikes would continue for now, "but that it was pragmatic about the pay rise it was asking for."

Aslef has already agreed the end of one strike, with the *i* new site revealing that "strike action in Wales is now unlikely to go ahead beyond Saturday after a pay deal was reached," with wage increases well below inflation. "According to the Aslef source, an agreement with Transport for Wales has been reached in principle for a 6.6 percent pay rise for drivers, subject to a confirmatory ballot."

The "union source" said, "Nothing has been offered from the companies we're striking against—there have been no negotiations. It's possible to do deals, we're only balloting on industrial action for those not offering anything. We've just been offered a 6.6 percent pay rise by Transport for Wales – it shows a deal can be done.

"Deals have been done with Eurostar at 8.2 percent and Scotrail at 5.1 percent. We're not actually asking for 9 percent, 10 percent, 11 percent—we have accepted a middle ground."

The *i* noted, "The comments echo a statement from Aslef's general secretary Mick Whelan, who said on Friday: 'We don't want to go on strike – strikes are always a last resort – but the companies, and the Government, have, I'm afraid, forced our hand… but we are always open for talks if the companies, or Government, want to come to the negotiating table and make a sensible offer'."

Next week, the RMT will hold two days of strikes, on August 18 and 20, with the unions ensuring that no united action takes place and allowing some services to be run.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to drivers during Saturday's strikes around the country.

At Ashford station in Kent, a driver said, "As far as we're concerned, a pay rise is deserved by our members. What that

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pay rise looks like we're yet to see, but what we're not going to accept is a reduction in our real term wage."

Asked how the surge in the cost of living was affecting him, the driver said, "We're relatively well paid, but we've still got energy bills rising, we still have food costs rising, we still got fuel costs rising, so it does affect us. It may not affect us as much as lower paid people, but it's all relative."

Asked what he thought of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer threatening to discipline shadow ministers if they attended picket lines, the driver responded, "I think it's a disgrace, because what he's got to remember is that the Labour Party was formed by trade unions and anyone who takes part in a legitimate dispute, he needs to remember that actually the footings of the Labour Party were started in places like this."

Asked his thoughts on a general election, which would expose the de facto Conservative-Labour coalition in office, he replied, "I think there should be a general election. We're going to end up again with an unelected leader of this country and what we need is the people of the country to have their say, whatever that say might be, and whatever party that might be, there's got to be an elected prime minister."

In Faversham, the WSWS spoke to workers about the necessity of a rank-and-file movement and the preparation of a general strike. A driver replied, "It's in everyone's interest to do it."

Asked his thoughts on the Conservative government's Great British Railway project, which is driving the campaign by the train companies to lower pay and attack conditions, the driver said, "They're using this argument that railway passenger numbers are not increasing. In May there was 92 percent of pre-pandemic levels. And it was showing an upward trend. And by the autumn we'd go back to or more than pre-pandemic level.

"At the same time, behind the scenes, nearly 20 percent of the whole network service is being cut and they're getting rid of all the jobs and just basically running a railway for the elites. It's not for the working class. Fares now are obscene.

"You walk into a station, buy a ticket, and you're going to get whacked. For the general public who just walk into a station, it's just another way of taking money from them. They're being fleeced."

The driver raised his concerns about the further roll-out of driver-only operation (DOO) trains, saying, "They have always looked at ways of making money… You need somebody back there to help disabled people to open the doors. I think what they're doing now is bringing on board these customer assistants, and they're on minimum wage, which will eventually supersede conductors and other members of staff.

"Everything that was negotiated over the last 27 years was a productivity deal. We gave them something as well. When you get to this stage, what more can you give? The only thing they look at now is our pensions. We have a final salary pension. Management say, 'Let's get into that, we're paying our 12 percent from every member of the railway's salary; let's cut that, and we can save ourselves X millions.'

"Look at the rolling stock. They're owned by the banks. We're paying them; it's just profit for them. The companies were being bailed out because there were no passengers travelling. Now they're sucking us into industrial action because we're all 'left-wing militants'. Whereas a year or two ago, we were essential 'key' workers."

At Neville Hill depot in Leeds a driver told our reporters that ten-hour days were common, "Safety regulations still supposedly apply but they are under attack."

At a picket line of drivers employed by Cross Country in Leeds, a driver said, "They just want you to accept what you're given. People have had enough. Safety is a priority for us."

He said of government plans to bring in agency staff as scabs during strikes, "Agency will have no experience. It's not safe." The attitude from the rail companies was, "Safety comes first, until we want to replace you with agency workers".

Another driver said that the cost-of-living crisis was making it impossible to live. "We will be hit with a fuel bill increase in October. I have a child to feed."

A customer host said, "I'm on £22,000 a year. The strikes are needed because everyone should be on better wage."

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