

UK Conservative government unveils dictatorial plan to “smash the rail strikers”

Robert Stevens, Thomas Scripps
18 August 2022

More than 45,000 rail workers began the first of two additional days of national strikes Thursday against infrastructure firm Network Rail and 14 train operating companies. The strike resulted in just one in five rail services being able to run nationwide.

Many more will be impacted Friday due to the knock-on effects, with the second of the 24-hour strikes to be held Saturday.

Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT), Unite and Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) union members are striking over pay and attacks on working conditions and benefits won by workers over generations of struggle. The Conservative government is seeking to impose its cuts and speedups as part of its Great British Railways reprivatisation scheme.

On the eve of the strike, Tory Transport Secretary Grant Shapps took to the pages of the *Daily Mail* to outline what the newspaper called the “Minister’s 16-point plan to smash the rail strikers”. Shapps headlined his own opinion piece, “We WILL take on these Luddites... just like Thatcher”.

In fact, the plan outlined by Shapps goes far beyond any anti-union legislation imposed by Thatcher during the 1980s. These are the laws required for police state rule, handing the government dictatorial powers to stop any strike. Point 10 proposes to end the ban in the draconian Civil Contingencies Act on using the regulations to stop strike action which the government deems will create a “national emergency”.

Shapps boasted, “Two of the 16 measures have already been implemented—raising damages for unlawful action, and allowing agency workers to temporarily cover for strikers.”

The rest are: increasing the ballot threshold for strike action, doubling the notice period for strike action to four weeks, allowing only one strike action per mandate, imposing absolute limits on picket numbers, restrictions

on picketing near critical infrastructure, implementing an “inflammatory language” pretext for prosecuting pickets and an “online intimidation” pretext for censorship, allowing employers to bypass unions in agreements with workers, government interference in union ballots, limiting time available for union duties, implementing minimum service levels, removing automatic deduction of trade union dues from wages and taxing strike payments.

The attacks on rail strikers are central to an offensive against the entire working class. Shapps wrote that his Great British Railways plan was “bigger than one industry. Britain, as everyone knows, has a growth and productivity problem... One of the quickest ways to drive growth is by reforming outdated, inefficient and wasteful working practices.”

The government is backed by the Labour Party, with leader Sir Keir Starmer again instructing shadow ministers to keep away from picket lines this week on pain of losing their cabinet seats. It has no fundamental opposition to the raft of legislation being enacted to shackle the working class.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch responded to Shapps by telling Sky News he was “getting more and more hysterical.”

“What I think you’re seeing is a man who’s worried about his future. He’s got to try and flex his right-wing muscles in front of a parade of two really right-wing people [Conservative Party leadership contenders Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak] who are going to be his boss.

“So I don’t know what Grant Shapps is up to. I don’t think the employers really know what he’s up to. And I don’t think the officials at the Department for Transport know what he’s up to.”

This is a criminal minimisation of the threat posed to the working class. If Shapps is making a pitch for a place in the next Tory cabinet by proposing these measures, then what does that say about the cabinet and its agenda!

The Socialist Equality Party warned in its first of the rail strikes, “The ruling class wants to finish the job Thatcher began in 1984, when she set out to break the miners to end all opposition to her social counter-revolution.”

In its next statement, the SEP elaborated, “This is no ordinary industrial dispute. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his government of political gangsters want to emulate Margaret Thatcher’s targeting of the miners in 1984-85, which ended in a defeat that transformed the UK into a playground of the super-rich and began a social nightmare for millions of working people.”

Referring to hit pieces in the right-wing media branding strikers “Putin’s stooges”, the SEP explained, “Just as Thatcher’s depiction of the miners as ‘the enemy within’ heralded a massive state offensive involving 13,000 arrests, 200 imprisonments, nearly 1,000 sackings, two deaths on picket lines and three digging for coal, so too the depiction of rail workers as ‘Putin’s friends’ prepares the way for the full mobilisation of the state—this time against the entire working class.”

Shapps has confirmed this warning totally. He is not some “hysterical” loose cannon; he is currently the government’s point man in an historic assault on the working class being waged in conjunction with the major corporations.

Speaking ahead of the strike at an RMT members’ briefing, Lynch referred to the “demands that the [train operating] companies are putting forward under the direct instruction of the government”. These were, he explained, “for radical changes to work in practice, terms and conditions”, “to shed tens of thousands of thousands of jobs”, for “driver-only or driver-controlled operation of trains”, “to introduce new contracts of employment for everyone without exception”, “to make Sunday working mandatory for all staff”; all with no “guarantee of no compulsory redundancies” and no “new pay offer beyond...two percent and one percent for all the productivity”.

But Lynch appealed to these same employers again on the day of the strike, “If we can get the companies negotiating freely, without being shackled by the government, we can negotiate a settlement in this dispute and get the railways back to running fully.”

Andrew Haines, the chief executive of Network Rail, bluntly rebuffed him on ITV, arguing, “the common factor here is the RMT; it’s not the government.”

The RMT is attempting to portray Shapps as a rogue element, halting what should be the smooth progress

towards a deal, to perpetuate ~~that myth~~ ^{shame} that a negotiated settlement in workers’ interests is possible and allow the union to pursue its usual strategy of agreeing a workable sellout with the employers. It fears an open conflict between rail workers and the government would be a catalyst for a growing sentiment for struggle among millions of workers.

Lynch pleaded in the members’ briefing for at least a few train firms to come forward with deals that the union bureaucracy can sell to their members as the basis for ending the strikes. Lynch stated, “We need to secure a deal through negotiations across all three sections.” This “means referendums for the affected members as the offers came in, so if there’s an offer on London Underground we may have to do a referendum there. If there’s offers in the other companies... we’ll go to those”.

The RMT has already done a separate deal at Merseyrail, alongside the TSSA, for 7.1 percent. Speaking to BBC radio Thursday, Luke Chester, organising director at the TSSA in London, cited the agreement to make the point that the union would be “100 percent” willing to negotiate on working conditions and working practices.

Last week, an ASLEF train drivers’ union source told the *i* new site it had reached an agreement “in principle for a 6.6 percent pay rise for drivers” with the Labour Party-run government in Wales. The source added, “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.”

But the government is determined to impose an even more brutal defeat. Ahead of this week’s strikes the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote that “Only a combined industrial and political offensive by the working class can defeat the trade unions’ efforts to suppress the growing strike movement and prevent any political challenge to the Tory government and Labour’s right-wing policies.” Rail workers must take stock of events and turn to the building of rank-and-file committees, operating independently of the unions, to lead this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact