

UK rail workers speak from the picket line

“Going forward we’re going to end up with what’s essentially like a revolution... I think the Tories are on borrowed time”

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with pickets at the Longsight Traincare Depot in **Manchester** on the first day of resumed national rail strikes by members of the Rail, Maritime, Transport; Transport and Salaried Staffs Association; and Unite unions.

An engineer told our reporters the dispute was not just about pay, it was about the “decimation of terms and conditions.” Management “want us to work three weekends out of four... 39 weeks of nights in a year.” He said, “They’re going back to 100 years ago and it just infuriates me.”

A third-generation rail worker, he said they were coming after pensions too. “I’ve got 37 years in the pension scheme. I’ll be honest, that’s a concern for me. I left school at 16 and I’ve worked ever since. It’s not only your terms and conditions, your pay, they now want to put you into poverty when you retire.” He warned, “We’re going to see a lot of pensioners dying this winter.”

The picket explained that “This decimation is 12, 13, 14 years in the offing.” He pointed to Phase 2 BC in 2010, “a national restructure of the rail system. What they’re asking for now they were asking for back then.” This was aimed at deskilling, with “multi-skilled, cross-boundary working.”

With his years of experience, he pointed to the significance of the privatisation of the railways, saying “Since Thatcher they’ve sold off everything, the essential necessities.” His wages had gone up under privatisation, “which shows how much money they knew they were going to make.” The system was aimed solely at the “privateers,” as “The contracts are so lucrative that these tops will never lose money.”

He explained that strikers were being attacked for not crossing boundaries, as if this was some “archaic unionised thing.” In fact, “all the private companies carved out an area for themselves,” which impacted on

maintenance. In his own work, he said, “literally, where there’s a block joint, you maintain that bit, we maintain that bit ... nothing to do with archaic rules and regulations,” but everything to do with private profits.

He said that the companies are trying to paper over a crumbling 65-70-year-old infrastructure with inappropriate technology—“putting an Elastoplast on an open wound”—while cutting Maintenance Scheduled Tasks by half. “The only people who are going to lose out are the people who are being ripped off by the rail fares, so it’s all interconnected.”

He was clear that workers are being blamed for the cost-of-living crisis. “They’re now saying inflation will go up because we’re asking for a pay rise. Bullshit. Inflation has already gone up.” This will continue, he said, “Unless we stand up, people are just going to get poorer and poorer.”

“They want a submissive society, people who are afraid to speak up for themselves, but I think this has had the reverse effect,” he said. Expressing hopes that “we’ve started a movement,” he said he would come out on a general strike, as “It may possibly come to that.” He had been reading up on the 1926 General Strike and said, “We’re going back nearly 100 years ago, and it’s the same problem now.”

WSWS reporters also spoke to pickets at the Ashbury Rail Operating Centre (ROC) in Manchester, part of Network Rail.

They explained the reasons for the strike as “cost of living issues, attacks on conditions. They are trying to cut down on jobs which would make it unsafe. We go out every week to check the track. That is what they are trying to cut back.”

Asked about manager manning a skeleton signalling operation during the strike, one said, “There have been near misses which should have been investigated but I doubt they have been.” Managers “do not have the

experience which has been acquired over years.”

Another picket explained of changes to maintenance workers’ roles and attempts to fire ticketing staff, “They are trying to deskill the work . You wouldn’t get a joiner to check your electrics or a plumber; you would get an electrician. It would mean everyone having to be able to do everything. Jack of all trades, master of none.

“Station staff are there to sell tickets but also do a host of other things to help people.” The employers’ changes were “all about cuts rather than how valuable the role can be.”

Asked about the government’s anti-strike legislation and plans to use agency staff as strikebreakers, one noted, “We have got the tightest anti-trade union laws in Europe,” but felt, “Further measures would galvanise people against them even further. It will get to the stage where we have nothing to lose.

“Now there is an achievable route to be able to go out on strike but if there is not an achievable route you will have wildcat walkouts. If it’s illegal anyway you might as well do it. Amazon warehouse workers have just walked out, they have been left with no choice.”

“You can’t have agency workers on the railways. I am a roster clerk low down on the pay scale, but it requires two or three weeks of training to do it. How can a contractor come in for two or three days of strikes, let alone signalling, or driving trains, it’s ridiculous.”

In **Bournemouth**, a guard at South Western rail with 15 years’ experience told our reporters of plans for driver-only trains and mass redundancies in Network Rail as part of the government’s Great British Railways scheme, “By removing front-line staff you’re actually stopping people’s ability to travel as well as it not being safe. Number one is safety. I was speaking to a guy who works at Network Rail, and he was saying that they want to move away from a rolling maintenance schedule to an as-and-when.” In other words, “rather than finding a problem and fixing it, they’ll wait for a problem and then fix it... It’s going to be dangerous.”

The guard told the WSWs, “We have a government that are hell-bent on reducing the workforce to reduce costs.” He continued, “Going forward we’re going to end up with what’s essentially like a revolution: we’re going to get all the unions, different political groups, all the public sector together and there’s going to be an uprising. And I think the Tories now are on borrowed time.”

Referring to other sections of the working class in struggle, the guard said, “There is going to be unified action,” referring to “bus drivers in London” as well as

“the post office... barristers, teachers, NHS [National Health Service] workers, who have been very, very badly treated. I think, such is the strength of feeling and the fact that people won’t be able to put food on the table, you’re going to end up with a situation where everyone’s going to come together through necessity.”

Inflation, he noted, “will be over 13 percent come January. Two-thirds of people are going to be in fuel poverty. Once that starts happening and it’s impacting on people, there will be an uprising.”

Mark Carter, a rail worker and the local RMT branch secretary, told the WSWs, “The bitter pill that they are trying to make us swallow is forcing redundancies, changes to terms and conditions and also fire-and-rehire tactics within the grades. They are looking to bring in more driver-only operated trains and then re-engage guards on a headline wage of about £10,000 less than they are already on. Also they want to shut every ticket office in the country. We think that we are going to be left with a husk of a railway.

“What this really is, is the McNulty report put into action. In the 1990s, the government of the time commissioned Sir Roy McNulty who was a bit of a captain of industry, to find out why the railways in this country aren’t as efficient as those in other European countries.

“Most railways in other countries are one single entity, they might have a bit of privatisation within them, but they are one entity, whereas over here they are completely fragmented.

“But Roy McNulty completely side stepped that and decided that the problem we have is that we haven’t got enough privatisation. So, the McNulty report recommends driver-only operation, a massive reduction in staff, and it recommends modernisation which means replacing people with technology. And they’ve used COVID as a smoke screen to bring that in.”

Mark added, “It’s the DfT [Department of Transport] that is driving this. They are driving this dispute. I think they knew that we would ballot for action given the radical changes that they want to put forward. They just want to take us on, and I think that this is going to be a long dispute.”



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