

UK rail workers conclude third round of national strikes

“If you don’t fight, you’ll never win”

Our reporters
21 August 2022

Over 45,000 rail workers in the UK have concluded their third round of national strikes. They are waging a determined fight against sweeping attacks on their pay, jobs and conditions as part of the government’s Great British Railways reprivatisation scheme.

Even more is at stake. The ruling Conservative Party, aided by its de facto coalition partner the Labour Party, is preparing a battery of anti-strike measures, intending to smash the rail workers as a first blow against the wave of industrial struggles pushing forward in the UK.

Confrontations between a ruling class turning to dictatorial forms of rule to police the social tensions unleashed by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine and a working class emerging from decades of suppression of the class struggle are on the agenda all over the world. In every country, the trade unions stand on the side of the government and the employers.

Strikes and protests in Sri Lanka have toppled the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa and workers now face the fierce repression meted out by his successor Ranil Wickremesinghe, while the unions pledge him their support.

In the United States, the Biden administration is moving to arbitrarily impose a contract on rail workers, in concert with the rail unions, enforcing real-terms pay cuts and grueling working conditions.

In the UK, the union bureaucracy is holding back millions of workers from entering the fray, minimising the threat of a crackdown and providing political cover for the Labour Party.

The mood in the working class is hardening for a fight nevertheless, and workers are closely following the struggles of their international class brothers and sisters.

Over the weekend, a US worker wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site* to state, “As a transit employee in the US, I stand and empathize with my brothers and sisters of UK rail workers. The conditions we work in and the challenges we face every day during these difficult times, which have come on the heels of the pandemic, deserve what is fair.” They urged “all the rail workers in UK to stay strong, they are fighting a good fight.”

Below is a selection of interviews from rail pickets across the UK last week.

An onboard London supervisor **Victoria** reporters, “If you don’t fight, you’ll never win.

“If we all go out together, then everyone will understand what is happening to us. Because it’s not just us on the trains or Royal Mail or the barristers. What’s going on is affecting every working person in this country, and other countries as well.

“The rents are going up, the bills are going up. The companies are making all these big profits and we just can’t take it anymore.

“We all worked through the pandemic, every single one of us on the frontline. As did the binmen, street cleaners, NHS staff. It’s a bit of a kick in the teeth really for them to say, ‘you are the best thing since sliced bread’ and now here we are. They are blaming us for the disruption to the economy when for years some of us have not had a pay rise, so how you can blame the working person for what’s going on in the financial world?

“To add insult to injury, striking tube workers are labeled ‘Putin’s stooges’ and ‘the enemy underground’. Thatcher is back!

“Anti-strike legislation is wrong. It’s the right of a working person in this country to be able to withdraw their labour legally, but they’re making it harder and harder. One of the proposals is that you must give a month’s notice to go on strike, so they can bring in agency people.”

A train dispatcher at **London Euston** said the strike was partly “about getting a decent pay rise—we’ve not had one in years. But they also want to ‘modernise’; we know that when they say ‘modernise’ it basically means that they want to cut our jobs.

“The Conservative government want to find a way to ban us—to put it in law to stop us striking. Like they were doing in the 80s, they want to take away the one right we have, which is to withdraw our services if we’re not given satisfactory conditions.”

On Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer’s ban on shadow ministers visiting picket lines, the worker said, “The Labour Party was created to defend working-class people. That’s their constituency and the leader is not supporting the one basic right that working people have.”

The dispatcher gave the WSWs a message of support for striking bus workers in London: “We’re standing here because we’re fighting for the same thing... I don’t think they’re getting what they deserve.” The number of bus drivers dying from COVID was “far higher than any other transport sector,” he said. “So you can see the dangers they’re facing. We’re standing with them, and when the opportunity comes, you’ll see us standing on their picket lines.”

Opposing the division of transport workers’ strikes across this week, he said: “It would be more effective if we all came together in a general strike. I believe it *will* come to that.”

On the picket line at **Leeds Station**, striker John said, “[Transport Secretary] Grant Shapps has been talking about an eight percent pay rise, but it’s really just four percent for one year and the other four percent the next, and only if we accept 2,000 redundancies, as well as a wholesale ripping up of our terms and conditions. That would mean more night shifts—40 weeks of nights a year. That would impact people’s lives massively.”

Train conductor Amy began working on the railways at the start of the UK’s first pandemic lockdown in March 2020. “There’s been a huge decline in conditions since then,” the young worker said. “It’s not just now with the cost-of-living crisis, it’s always been difficult for young people, to get a car, to get a house, start a family and that sort of thing. People work in rubbish conditions because they fear unemployment.

“I think it’s too long that we’ve had a two-party system. I don’t feel represented by the Labour Party.

“I come from a mining town near Newcastle and saw what happened after they closed down shipping and the mines. Even my generation now, we’re still being affected by some of those things.

“I would support a general strike, absolutely. It’s not just us that’s affected. It’s the system that’s really, really broken.”

A train driver at **Manchester Piccadilly** said, “We’ve had 12 years of government incompetence, rule by the banks.

“We’re a quarter way there to a general strike. For 20 years, we’ve rolled over and let them tickle our tummy.”

Another driver explained how the rail companies are trying to turn the public against the strike. “The guards are offering to work Sundays, but every Sunday the companies cancel trains, they run the strike timetable even though they’ve got enough staff, to blame the strikers.

“They’re paying managers £450 to scab. They get a piece of paper with a brief—it’s not safe. They’ve had major incidents.”

A catering worker of more than 20 years explained how the Great British Railways plan would affect her role. “All the jobs would go into one role... They’ll make us do jobs we’re not competent to do... I think they’re going to make us all redundant and reapply for our jobs.”

Another driver said, “I think everyone should stick together: teachers, the NHS are all coming out.” Speaking about the raft of anti-strike legislation being prepared by the government, she

said, “They’re trying to take the right to strike off us completely.”

A striking signal worker said, “I’ve been waiting for a national strike for 12 years. I’ve been going down to London on all those marches against austerity... This is the closest you’ll ever come to it [a national strike]. It’s within sight—we’ve got to do that extra bit.”

Another signal worker said, “The Tories are trying to outlaw industrial action, we’re going back to Victorian times”. He said of the role of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), they “have been very quiet. I’ve not heard them say anything.”

Driver Axel, 33, from **France** joined the picket line, along with a delegation from France’s CGT union, including another driver and station ticket worker.

He said, “We’re all in the same struggle. We try to give international solidarity and heighten awareness.

“Among French rail workers, news of the strikes here has been met with great enthusiasm. It raises hope for coordinated strikes in Britain, which will bolster the confidence of workers across the Channel.

“There are anti-union laws in France, but nowhere are they as severe as here. A few weeks ago in France, we organised strikes which didn’t respect the legal hurdles. The union leaders are one thing, workers are another, but the task of workers is to impose the strategy.

“I’ve heard about the struggles of rail workers in the US from the WSWs. It’s interesting to see renewed strike action there, because of the importance of the US economy in the world.

“In order not to chase the next inflation rate rise, we need to overthrow the system, we need an organisation that goes beyond bargaining and it has to be international.”



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