UK rail workers support US railroad struggle

“It’s good to see workers in America taking on the bureaucracy and government who are only out for their own gain.”

Our reporters
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100,000 rail workers in the United States are fighting a joint effort by the trade unions, Congress and President Biden to block a national strike. The workers are seeking to overturn gruelling conditions and years of declining wages. A “cooling off” period was scheduled to expire at 12:01 a.m. Friday.

On Wednesday evening, 500 attended a meeting sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees under the title, “Organize to prepare for a national strike!” As this was taking place, the Biden administration and the trade unions were working on a sellout announced Thursday morning which the bureaucracy is now attempting to force on their members.

Speaking with the WSWS, rail workers in the UK, who have taken part in repeated national strikes over the last three months, gave statements of solidarity with this critical struggle. Due to the frequent company victimisation of those identified as militants, and the censorship of comments by rank-and-file members, the workers have been kept anonymous.

In **Bristol**, a rail worker of 7 years said, “We are dealing with the same issues as our brothers and sisters in the US. In order to keep the railway system running we worked throughout the pandemic. We witnessed many of our colleagues get sick and in some cases die as a result. I remember going to work knowing I could die. As key essential workers we all knew the risk we were taking. We put ourselves in harm’s way in order to get the job done.

“Our union leaders were non-existent during the pandemic. Rail workers were getting sick and dying, yet no walkout was called. Instead, we received the occasional text message from their safe, socially distanced home/work-office.

“We were called heroes for risking our lives, now we are viewed as the new ‘enemy within’ for simply wanting to defend out right to a decent wage, pension and contractual conditions.

“The reward for our loyalty during the pandemic has been the threat of mass redundancy, the elimination of our current contracts and rehiring on inferior terms, as well as the raiding of our pension funds. The government is overseeing this destruction of jobs and deskilling of workers on behalf of the private operators, at the taxpayers’ expense. Control of the railways will only be handed back to the private operators when they are satisfied a desired level of profit extraction will be achieved.

“Our union has called several days of strike action but has sought to de-escalate through a negotiated sentiment, a sellout, from the word go. Two days of strike action this week have been suspended as a mark of respect for the death of the queen. Our union thinks the class struggle should make way for our new king.

“The only way the working class can defend itself against the ruling class is to castrate the union leadership of its power. Only through the formation of an independent alliance of workers committees can we do this. I fully support you in your struggle to achieve your political independence.”

A South Western Railway worker at **Bournemouth** rail station with several years’ experience was shocked to hear of the working conditions of US railway workers. She commented, “I fully support the US railway strike. I cannot imagine workers having to work 80 hours a week and without

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sick leave. They have to stand up against these terrible working conditions. No matter which country you live in, workers face the same situation. These railway companies make enormous profits at the expense of their workers.

"Here in the UK we are fighting to defend our pay and conditions. Many are going to lose their jobs with tickets office closures and other changes. The [Rail, Maritime and Transport union] RMT [which called off two days of national strike action out of "respect" for the queen] will have to resume strike action soon. We have to be in solidarity with other workers. I will put up your poster [reading "I support US rail workers"] in the mess room."

A platform worker said, "I'm supporting the US workers. It sounds in the US like it's similar to here. For the last two years the companies here said, 'oh, we'll increase your wages and this and that.' But now inflation is going up and they are not giving it us and so we're having strikes.

"The companies have also said they will shut down all the ticket offices so that will mean thousands of people will lose their jobs."

A WSWS reporter explained that many rail workers in the US work 80-hour weeks and don't even have time to see a doctor. The worker replied. "That's very bad and they have to go on strike. I would also say that the public using the trains in the US have to support them too, as at the end of the day they are workers themselves."

At **Manchester Piccadilly** rail station, a rail worker said, "I support the US workers going out on strike. I used to be in the military and it has become a lot more like that in every workplace.

"Someone said working conditions were like slavery, and I didn't agree at the time, but it's becoming more like that. You've got rights outside the workplace, but none inside."

After a WSWS reporter explained the brutal conditions facing workers on the US railways, and that these were the type of conditions that Network Rail and the private train companies want to impose in Britain, a guard said, "That's how I feel. I said about a year ago that at some point they are just going to say, 'accept these conditions or get another job.' People are getting fed up. The richer are getting richer and we're getting poorer. It's almost like we're going back to the dark ages."

The reporter told the worker that three rail workers had died within the space of 10-days on the US network. The guard replied, "That is going on in every line of business. It's all to do with keeping profits up. Look at what they are doing building the stadiums in Qatar for the World Cup. That is literally slave labour and the attitude of the companies is 'oh he's died building it, let's just get another worker in."

Another rail worker said, "I support the rail workers in the US. I support workers everywhere and I don't care who they are. This year there's been our cleaners out on strike, there's NHS [National Health Service] workers, teachers. Everyone deserves a fair deal and all the money not going to them at the top."

Another guard said, "I agree with rail workers in American going on strike, and workers everywhere, India, wherever. Conditions on the railways should be safe right across the board, full stop, right across the globe."

A young train driver for Northern Rail based at **Sheffield** station said it was "Good to see workers in America taking on the bureaucracy and government who are only out for their own gain.

"Workers of all countries should unite their power and rise up together.

"We are fighting for safety, customer service and our own jobs. They want to fire and rehire workers so they can pay them less. There needs to be human interaction to assist passengers including the elderly, it can't all be machine and robots. It's all about profit."

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