

Veteran UK rail worker speaks on British and US rail struggles

“If the US railroad workers take action it will have an impact on the working class everywhere”

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed a rail worker of more than three decades on the ongoing national strikes in Britain and the struggle of railroad workers in the United States.

He told our reporter, “We send solidarity and urge a joint struggle against these global railway companies. That’s the only way forward. To be able to organise such an international struggle, it’s necessary to organise independently of the trade union in both countries who are doing everything they can to delay and sabotage the struggles.

“The trade unions in the UK used the death of the queen to call off strikes for an extended period. The majority of rail workers are very angry about this decision. It’s the same kind of thing that the trade unions on the railways in the United States are doing by appealing to the railroad companies and state forces to try and head off a strike.”

Asked about the strikes in the UK, the worker explained, “The strike was sparked over here by an all-out assault on every aspect of working life from pay to the most basic safety maintenance, to a complete privatisation of what remains of Network Rail and handing the entire setup over to private companies.”

Speaking on the “disastrous safety conditions rail workers in America are facing,” he said, “With anybody who’s working 80 to 100 hours a week, the railroad companies are forcing them into situations where everything is dangerous. And there’s been a lot of instances of safety incidents here. Lots of workers have left the industry for this reason because it’s dangerous.”

“What they’re trying to do in the UK is cut 50 percent of safety inspections, which, as someone who has been on the railways for 35 years, I know that that means that most of the journeys that we’ll be making, we’re not going to know the condition of the track underneath, when we’re going 110 miles an hour! And that is not only putting rail workers in danger, but it’s putting the travelling public in serious danger.

“It’s going to be as ruthless and as brutal as what our American brothers and sisters are facing, which is provoking the current national strike.”

The WSWs asked what the rail worker thought of the brutal conditions suffered by American rail workers, including the lack of sick leave.

“Well, it’s obviously been disastrous, especially during COVID. Workers coming into work ill or losing pay. It’s like a choice between a bullet and poison. Either way, it increases pressure on workers to come in while they’re ill.

“As a railwayman, I know that has implications not only for your colleagues, but how you actually do the job, how you keep the track safe. It’s criminal in the extreme and it bears no regard to the lives of workers, what impact this has at home, on the track and on the railway. It’s a ruthless drive for profits at the expense of lives.

“I once had to work 60-hour weeks after the union agreed to it. We forced a strike over it and the union had to overturn this arrangement they made. It almost destroyed my family life, for an extended period. I couldn’t see the children. I was going to sleep, getting up, going to work, going to sleep, getting up, going to

work and everyone at work looked as white as a ghost. It got to a point where we couldn't take it any longer. I can't imagine what another 20 to 40 hours on top of that is doing to our American brothers and sisters. It does explain the intensity of the fight they want to wage."

Asked if the employers were driving towards the same regime in the UK, he warned, "That would be the result of the current strikes being defeated. We're not doing 80 to 100 hours a week, we are able to take days off for appointments and so on. But if they get this 'Great British Railways' project through, they're talking about tearing up all our conditions so that we face the same issues that are present in the United States. And so we have a common cause to not only drive back, but resist every assault, and that requires the international organisation of railway workers.

"One of the statements of the incoming ministers [in Liz Truss's Conservative government], Jacob Rees-Mogg, was that there is no entitlement to paid leave. This is the kind of government that has been brought in. One of its main aims is to remove the right to strike and jail workers who seek to defend themselves against such attacks."

The situation in the UK and US he said was "incredibly similar. What we face in Britain is the same as railworkers in the United States. There is a state threat to the most basic democratic rights that have been achieved in both countries.

"In the States they aired moving to ban the strikes and in the UK they are trying to pass legislation making it illegal not to run a service during a strike."

Our reporter asked the worker's opinion of the rank-and-file meeting of US rail workers sponsored by the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

"We can't rely on the unions in the US or the UK or anywhere else. We have to build rank-and-file committees. Even the most basic forms of action can only take place outside the outdated trade unions organisations. The meeting was a big step forward.

"This has to be publicised among strikers in the UK. We're all becoming increasingly frustrated by the way the rail strike is being conducted here by the unions. The feeling for a general strike to confront this government and defeat it is very widespread. We have to let everyone know about this critical event and it

should be repeated across the world.

On the significance of the resolution passed by the meeting he said, "The US rail workers have made a stand against the collaboration of the union to destroy their living standards and democratic rights. They've drawn a line in the sand and this is what they are going to fight on.

"There is a sense that is growing everywhere in the working class that you can't take a step back because there's a cliff behind you and real dangers; that everything is threatened—access to food, shelter, health care and welfare. They are trying to push us over a cliff, but the US workers have made a big stand and it should be popularised all over the world.

"I would say when the deadline passes, mount pickets and bring your colleagues out.

"If the US railroad workers do take this action it will have an impact on the working class everywhere. As with the rail strikes in the UK, they began a whole wave of industrial action. It unleashed the immense tension there is everywhere, and demands for a struggle against the assault on living standards.

"What's very important in the resolution is that it lays out the basis for a conflict with the trade union bureaucracy which has led rail workers to the point where they are doing 80 and 100-hour weeks. It laid the basis for a struggle against these organisations and to break free from their control.

"There is now the possibility of uniting this struggle across the United States, across the world. It's a tremendous advance for the international working class."



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