

UK train drivers mount further national strikes as rail unions seek a sell-out deal with Tory government

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More than 9,000 train drivers at 13 train operating companies joined national strike action on October 5 as part of a determined fight for a wage increase after three years of a government-backed pay freeze.

The strike by members of the ASLEF union that covers 96 percent of train drivers impacted train services at Avanti West Coast, Chiltern Railways, Cross Country, Greater Anglia, Great Western Railway, Hull Trains, LNER, London Overground, Northern Trains, Southeastern, TransPennine Express, West Midlands Trains and East Midland Railways.

This roll call demonstrates that train drivers are fighting a coordinated offensive by train operating companies backed by the Tory government.

Train operating companies (TOCs) were handed £16 billion of taxpayers' money during the pandemic, yet they are denying key workers a pay increase for a third consecutive year, with inflation at 12.3 percent and set to rise. ASLEF has stated, "the companies with whom we are in dispute have not offered us a penny."

In the face of this onslaught, ASLEF, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) and Unite are working to block unified action that is necessary to defeat the government's agenda. The rail unions are continuing to stagger and divide industrial action against a massive assault on pay, jobs, terms and conditions.

Yesterday's was the fourth national strike by ASLEF members over pay, after earlier one day stoppages on July 30, August 13 and October 1. It is the largest strike by train drivers in 25 years.

Rail workers' renewed militancy was overshadowed yesterday by mass media coverage gloating over the friendly relations struck between the Truss government, ASLEF and the RMT over how to get rail strikes off the

agenda.

The *Guardian's* article was headlined, "Rail unions hope to find solution to strikes 'together' with UK government." It cited ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan imploring, "Only the government can correct this and we ask them to do so." The newspaper cited Tuesday's speech by Transport Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan at the Conservative Party conference in which she declared, "there is a deal to be done."

Trevelyan was not offering an "olive branch"—she was pleading for a lifeline for a government under siege. She stated, "the very last thing the country needs right now is more damaging industrial action."

Just days after being sworn in as Transport Secretary, Trevelyan held closed-door talks with ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan and RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch. Her predecessor Grant Shapps had long refused to meet with rail unions, declaring "We will take on the Luddites just like Thatcher." Under Trevelyan, the Tories are proceeding with anti-strike legislation, while turning to the unions as the most reliable mechanism for quashing workers' resistance.

There will be no retreat from the £2 billion worth of cuts demanded on the rail network as part of the Tories' re-privatisation model for Great British Railways.

A glimpse of this was provided by Trevelyan's comments Wednesday over ticketing offices. She declared that ticket purchases at stations account for only 12 percent of sales, making clear the government's plans for their mass closure remain.

Trevelyan's overture to the rail unions builds on initial private meetings she held with Lynch and Whelan this past fortnight. While the government intends to proceed with its draconian reform agenda, both rail union leaders provided glowing reports of their discussion with the Tory

transport secretary. Whelan described her as “welcoming and listening,” saying he “looked forward to trying to find a solution together.” Lynch described it as “a very pleasant meeting” and “a good start.”

What should rail workers make of this rapturous response by Lynch and Whelan to Liz Truss’s new transport secretary? Patted on the head, but left empty handed, they had nothing they could sell to their members to justify calling off this week’s action. But Lynch and Whelan have made it plain that any minor revisions to pay restraint, or token modifications to the government’s sweeping restructuring agenda, will be seized on to end the dispute.

The RMT is now re-balloting its 40,000 rail members across 15 train operators and Network Rail as its strike mandate expires after this Saturday’s action. In its ballot notification to members, Lynch claimed the union’s strategy is working: “Your determination has brought the employers around the negotiating table. The government, who are controlling the negotiations, has also started to meet your union.”

The central demand of the RMT and ASLEF has been for the government’s reform agenda be realised via negotiation rather than “imposed.” Lynch and his fellow officials are merely seeking to retain their partnership with Network Rail, the TOCs and the government that has been established over decades.

Any notion that Saturday’s October 1 “mega strike” was the start of a renewed offensive by the rail unions, following their cancellation of strikes during the official 10-day mourning for Queen Elizabeth II, should be reevaluated by rail workers.

Last Saturday’s action reduced services to 10 percent across the rail network, showing the power in the hands of rail workers to defeat the pay freeze and crush the government’s agenda for mass job and pension cuts, the closure of ticket offices and a privatization model that hands train operators guaranteed profits.

The “mega strike” was the only coordinated action between all four rail unions since rail strikes began in June. But it was relegated to a one-off Saturday event because Lynch and company are working to suppress an insurgency among rail workers that has already sparked a broader strike wave.

With the Tory government in turmoil and British capitalism rocked by a series of financial crises, Lynch has responded by dropping his earlier talk of a general strike. His Enough is Enough campaign group is functioning ever more openly as a means of corralling

workers behind a future Labour government, while Sir Keir Starmer’s cabinet functions as a de facto coalition partner to the Tories.

This week, the rail unions have reverted to type, staging separate actions and refusing to coordinate a fightback. TSSA, representing ticket office, station and control room staff, held a stoppage on October 5 that coincided with the ASLEF strike at just one company, Cross Country. TSSA members will strike at Great Western Railway on October 6-7 and then at Avanti and c2c on October 8, which will coincide with the last solitary strike by the RMT.

Whelan has ringfenced the train drivers’ fight against the pay freeze from the wider cuts faced by their co-workers including train conductors, signallers, maintenance engineers and station staff.

The RMT has similarly hailed its 7 percent agreement at MerseyRail, holding it up as an example for how the national dispute could be ended. Its deal not only meant a de facto pay cut, it ended a long-running dispute over the downgrading of the guards, introducing a new job role based on a two-tier workforce.

All back door negotiations between ASLEF, the RMT and the Truss government must be opposed by rail workers. A unified industrial and political campaign must be launched to defeat the Tories’ Great British Railways privatization agenda, forcing the withdrawal of all attacks on jobs, conditions, pensions, ticket offices and safety, and the achievement of an above-inflation pay raise to compensate for a three-year pay freeze amid a rampant cost-of-living crisis.

We urge members of the RMT, ASLEF, TSSA and Unite to take control of their dispute and form rank-and-file strike committees at every depot, maintenance yard and workplace. As the recent Socialist Equality Party statement explained, “Such committees will provide a vehicle for workers to reach across the divisions being imposed and develop a fightback across industry sectors and national borders, uniting every section of the working class against a government determined to impose the full brunt of the capitalist crisis on their backs.”



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