

Rank-and-file must take control of UK rail strike

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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Six months after national rail strikes launched a “summer of discontent” against the Conservative government, an urgent discussion is needed among railway workers on a strategy for victory.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) is currently balloting 40,000 members to renew the powerful strike mandate they delivered back in May. The Socialist Equality Party calls for an emphatic YES vote, but in doing so it is necessary to draw a balance sheet of the struggle to date.

Rail workers are demanding unified action, but officials from the RMT, train drivers’ union ASLEF, TSSA and Unite are working to divide their members and prevent the necessary industrial and political offensive that can defeat the Tory government’s historic assault on jobs, pay, conditions, safety and pensions.

The rail unions continue to insist that limited industrial action will force the Conservative government and employers to the negotiating table, where a deal can be reached over implementation of the Great British Railways re-privatisation agenda.

Only a few weeks ago, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch claimed the union’s strategy was 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.”

ASLEF and RMT officials described talks with Transport Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan at the end of September as a breakthrough. ASLEF’s Mick Whelan said she was “welcoming and listening,” and that he “looked forward to trying to find a solution together.” Lynch described his meeting with the transport secretary as “very pleasant” and “a good start.”

Less than a week later at the Tory party conference, Trevelyan denounced rail strikes, confirming her government’s plans to crush industrial action through fines, agency scabs and minimum service laws that will

ban strikes in essential industries.

At a mass meeting of RMT members on October 20, the RMT reiterated its strategy of partial strikes in pursuit of a deal with the government. Yet both Lynch and RMT Assistant General Secretary John Leach conceded that “no new offers have been confirmed over the summer”.

The government, Transport for London (TfL) and employers have not budged an inch.

Lynch outlined the scale of the government’s assault as “the most draconian changes to terms and conditions” in decades. Its agenda was proceeding “on a ticking time bomb basis”, with thousands of jobs threatened at the TOCs, Network Rail and the London Underground.

The government plans to close 1,000 ticket offices, downgrade the role of train guards and expand driver-only operated trains. It wants compulsory Sunday working and the multi-skilling of existing grades. At Network Rail at least 2,000 jobs are in the firing line, with new employment contracts that will slash pay, entitlements, and downgrade safety. A pay freeze is now into its third year.

The RMT, ASLEF, TSSA and Unite are deliberately blocking joint industrial and political action. ASLEF insists that drivers are involved in separate pay disputes with the 14 TOCs.

The RMT makes no appeal to defeat ASLEF’s divisive policy because its own officials are working to prevent a united struggle. Lynch stated at last week’s mass meeting, “the next phase [of industrial action] will be a version of the three-day strike for Network Rail and a slightly different version for the TOCS and then another version again for the train operators... it may be that different groups do slightly different things.”

It is impossible to win on this basis.

The class aims and objectives of rail workers and the union bureaucracy are diametrically opposed. Workers want action to defeat the government’s attacks on pay,

jobs and conditions, while the bureaucrats who control the RMT, ASLEF, TSSA and Unite are seeking an accommodation with the government.

Throughout 2021, rail unions participated in the Johnson government's Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG), formed to oversee the re-privatisation of the TOCs under Great British Railways. The RMT signed the RIRG's Enabling Framework Agreement in June 2021, pledging to "specifically address the workforce reforms and staff cost challenges the rail industry is facing".

The RMT only started balloting for strike action this year after Transport Secretary Grant Shapps made clear the Tories were proceeding with their plans over the heads of the rail unions.

No conditions have been placed by the RMT on its talks with the government. Its only concrete demand is no compulsory redundancies, while agreeing to thousands of job cuts via the government's Voluntary Severance Scheme.

The RMT's overriding demand is that workplace reform be "negotiated not imposed". Its sole concern is to preserve its corporatist partnership with the government. Hence Lynch's grovelling appeal: "I call upon the new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to unshackle the rail industry so they can come to a settlement with RMT."

A new strategy is needed.

Across the railways, BT, Royal Mail, ports and elsewhere, the working class has the power to defeat a Tory government rotting on its feet. But this means a direct challenge to the efforts of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to sabotage any fightback. Lynch responded to this summer's strike wave by fronting campaign group Enough is Enough, the central purpose of which is to corral workers behind the Labour Party. Lynch promotes Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, whose pledge at the recent Trades Union Congress annual conference was to "create a modern industrial strategy" that "will strengthen the role of trade unions in our society." This is a recipe for corporatism, i.e., an alliance between the unions, government and corporations to "restore economic stability", suppress the class struggle and defend the global position of British imperialism as it launches war against Russia and China.

To take control of the dispute, rank-and-file strike committees must be elected at every depot and workplace to draw up a list of demands and make plans for unified action across every section of the railways. Demands should include:

- No closed-door negotiations with the government,

Network Rail or the private operators. No separate agreements and no compromise: demand the complete withdrawal of the Great British Railways agenda.

- All negotiations to be livestreamed to members with full access to all documents and control by the rank-and-file.

- An immediate inflation-busting pay deal to reverse the three-year pay freeze with inflation now running at 12.6 percent.

- Immediate strike-pay equal to loss of earnings. The dues paid into the rail unions over decades must be used to fund all-out strike action to defeat the government.

- Unified action with BT, Royal Mail, port workers, National Health Service staff and teachers, including a general strike to defeat the government.

The same Tory and Labour politicians who claim there is "no money" to provide decent pay, terms and conditions handed £16 billion to the private rail operators during the pandemic, and hundreds of billions more to the corporate and financial elite over the past two and a half years. The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of the major transport companies, the seizure of their profits and their conversion to public ownership under the democratic control of the working class.

We urge rail workers who agree with this to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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