RMT promotes ScotRail deal as model for ending national rail strike

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union is trumpeting the pay settlement last Thursday with ScotRail as a triumph and an example of how a negotiated agreement could be reached to end the six-month dispute against Network Rail, the 14 train operating companies and Tory government.

In a press release RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch stated, “This is a fantastic victory for our members in ScotRail and I congratulate them on their strong strike actions, without which there would have been no deal reached.”

The RMT claims the agreement constitutes a “big pay rise”, pointing to the headline figure of between 7 and 9 percent backdated to April. Even this is below RPI inflation that reached 11.1 percent in April and is now above 14 percent. It refers to improved maternity payments and Sunday benefits, which are offset by a major real terms pay cut. ScotRail has boasted that the deal includes an “increase” to the minimum flat rate of £10.50 an hour, just £1 above the existing minimum wage.

The RMT published the press release on its Facebook page, which prompted a small number of comments describing the deal as “below inflation” and an “Oliver Twist moment.” This prompted an open defence of the sell-out, with one response insisting that “in the current climate the expectations of most is not of RPI or even CPI [inflation].”

The press release published on Facebook redacted the summary of the contents of the deal, which only appears on the RMT website in the footnotes. It consists of a basic 5 percent increase, which is “broken down as a 2.2 percent increase to recognise the cost-of-living challenges (funded by Transport Scotland and paid to all general grades since April 2022), and a further 2.8 percent increase (to be funded by ScotRail), which recognises and rewards the flexibility of rostering arrangements as ScotRail responds to changes in our markets as we emerge from the pandemic.”

A £750 payment is “consolidated into pay for all general grade staff in recognition for accepting use of technology.” This involves the use of mobile devices for checking and selling tickets by conductors and ticket examiners using a passenger assistance app.

The RMT and drivers’ union ASLEF have worked to divide and demobilise the fight over pay and conditions. The ScotRail dispute was ringfenced from the national rail strikes against Network Rail and the train operating companies’ cost-cutting and restructuring on top of a three year pay freeze. This was justified on the grounds that ScotRail had been taken back into public ownership.

The devolved Scottish National Party (SNP) government stripped Dutch based transport company Abellio of the franchise from April 1 this year. But the arms-length company set up by the SNP government presented a 2.2 percent pay offer, demonstrating it was no less ruthless that the private operators.

In May a ban on overtime and rest day working by train drivers led to the introduction of an emergency timetable cutting the number of daily trains by a third. ASLEF stalled holding an industrial ballot after drivers rejected a revised 4.2 percent offer, but eventually overcame resistance in July with a 5 percent agreement. The RMT held off holding industrial action until after the last day of national strike action in England on October 8, before the RMT re-balloted its 40,000 members for a new mandate.

Around 2,000 RMT members at ScotRail including conductors, ticket examiners, station staff and hospitality workers walked out in one-day stoppages on October 10 and 29 and were poised to strike on

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November 19, followed by stoppages every Friday and Saturday from December 2 to Christmas Eve. This was in response to a previous revised offer of 5 percent plus £500 in consolidated pay, again based on the use of mobile ticketing devices. RMT officials met with the company on November 9 and agreed to suspend further action to vote on a deal based on a £250 pay improvement on the previous offer.

The agreement recommended by the RMT was accepted by a margin of 67.7 percent, according to the BBC. The vote result was not reported in the RMT press release which wanted to conceal significant opposition as it proclaimed a sweeping victory. “This negotiated settlement shows what can be done when employers behave reasonably and are willing to do a deal,” Lynch stated.

The RMT has elsewhere reported that it is recommending acceptance of a pay deal reached with Transport for Wales of between 4.5 and 6.5 percent with productivity strings.

Lynch is sitting on further strike action across England. On October 16 a strike mandate of 91 percent was returned by 40,000 RMT members to continue national strike action, exceeding the 87 percent vote in May. But the union executive has ensured no further strike action was scheduled for two months, with only four days of strikes on December 13-14 and 16-17, and a further four days from the beginning of January.

The RMT cancelled three days of strike action on November 5,7,9 citing “intensive negotiations” with the Rail Delivery Group. But Lynch emerged from the talks after two weeks to declare that nothing new had been offered in writing! Andrew Haines, chief executive of Network Rail, declared to a rail industry conference while the talks continued that the elimination of 1,850 maintenance jobs would start from December 3.

The RMT has confined the issue of “job security” to a call for job losses covering around a fifth of the maintenance workforce to be secured through voluntary redundancy. Haines announced this can be achieved through applications already received.

Lynch then met with Conservative Transport Secretary Mark Harper last Thursday, describing the talks as “productive” and speaking of a “shared agreement” for “the two sides – the trade unions and the employers” to bring an end to the dispute. He is due to meet Rail Minister Huw Merriman and rail employers this Friday and has criticised Harper for not acting fast enough to end the dispute. A press release today states, “RMT have said the government’s ‘lack of urgency’ is ‘astonishing,’ given the strike action scheduled to start in two weeks’ time.”

The deal which the RMT wants to discuss with Network Rail consists of a 4 percent increase this year and the same amount for 2023, with an additional £500. The union complains that the government is blocking this discussion. If this can be rectified, then ScotRail proves that an additional one or two percent might be all that the RMT requires to proclaim “victory” and end the strike. This would be used to justify the RMT’s collusion in the £2 billion cuts demanded as part of the reprivatisation of the network through the Great British Railways plan, including the closure of 1,000 ticket offices and the extension of Driver Only Operated to remove more guards from the trains, on top of the mass redundancies at Network Rail.

The continued resistance of rail workers to this savage agenda requires a rejection of the corporatist line up of Lynch with the rail bosses and Tory government. We urge all rail workers to read and share the statement produced by the Socialist Equality Party “Rank-and-file must take control of the UK rail strike”. This outlines a strategy to mobilise rail workers alongside the growing strike movement in opposition to the Tory government and its de facto Labour allies being stifled by the union bureaucracy.

The jobs and terms and conditions of rail workers are non-negotiable to feed another profit frenzy and dismantling of safety. The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of the major transport companies, the seizure of their fortunes and their conversion to public ownership under the democratic control of the working class.

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