

UK rail strike: government brokered talks end with demand for surrender

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We urge rail workers to contact the WSWs and share your own views and information on the dispute. We will protect your anonymity.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) executive's bid to end the national rail dispute with a government brokered deal has ended with the rail employers demanding surrender terms.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch met with Conservative Rail Minister Huw Merriman and representatives of Network Rail and the 14 train operators in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) last weekend.

Lynch described his initial meeting with Transport Minister Mark Harper last Thursday as "positive", claiming the Tory government had "got rid of the bellicose monsters we use to have."

This was followed by the RMT's demand that the government allow Network Rail and the train operators to negotiate a settlement. Harper was even criticised by the RMT for not arranging the meeting to give enough time to avert the next round of two 48 hour strikes by 40,000 rail workers from December 13.

The outcome of the RMT union executive's call for government intervention is a draft framework agreement for restructuring the rail network based on the re-privatisation agenda outlined in the Great British Railways strategy document, including £2 billion in cuts.

The RDG put forward an insulting 4 percent pay increase for this year and the same for 2023, saying this met the "cost of living challenges". Even this well-below inflation deal, running over two years, is made conditional on a raft of attacks, including a mass job severance programme that exposes the promise of no compulsory redundancies before April 1, 2024, as a lie.

A bonfire of workers' rights and conditions includes extending Driver Operated Only (DOO) to all train companies, with the downgrading and removal of guards from the remaining half of the network, the closure of all

ticket offices and the creation of multi-skilled station grades. It also involves compulsory Sunday working and the move towards a casualised workforce through part-time contracts built around more flexible working rosters, acceptance of new technology with no payment, and a review of existing annual leave and sick pay arrangements.

The RMT, while formally rejecting the deal as unacceptable, called for an extension of the talks to Monday before reluctantly confirming that strike action would proceed.

Network Rail put forward an increase of just 1 percent on its previous offer, to 5 percent this year plus 4 percent for 2023 and another formal commitment of no compulsory redundancies until January 2025. The infrastructure company operated at arms-length by the government described this as its "best and final offer." Network Rail confirmed during previous talks in November that the process for cutting 1,850 maintenance jobs, 20 percent of the workforce, would begin from December 3 through voluntary redundancies.

The RMT executive also agreed to put the Network Rail ultimatum to its members through an electronic vote due to close next Monday. The TSSA white collar union, which was also involved in the talks, agreed to withdraw its strike action by controllers on Network Rail on December 17 to put the same derisory offer.

The union hierarchy is actively opposed to unifying the struggle of rail workers against the Tory government and the employers. Since strike action by the RMT began in June, with 8 days of stoppages, the rail unions have all ensured that industrial action has rarely coincided as they pursue separate deals with the government and employers. ASLEF train drivers took their fifth day of strike action in November, but the union has yet to announce further dates. General Secretary Mick Whelan has attended separate talks with the Conservative transport minister.

While TSSA has called off the action on Network Rail, it has increased the strike action on December 17 by thousands of workers in management, station, control, ticketing and onboard roles from two companies to six, but only for one day. Unite has also named strike dates to coincide with the action by the RMT next week and further action in January. This involves workers based at seven control rooms around the country responsible for controlling and managing the network power supply.

Unite, as with ASLEF, has pursued the fight against the 3-year pay freeze divorced from the overall restructuring that is targeting jobs, terms and conditions across the railways. Neither union has even stipulated a pay demand.

Lynch is presented as a militant union leader, but this is belied by his pursuit of a corporatist deal with the government and employers. In the build-up to the talks, Lynch sent an open letter on November 29 pitched to business groups including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors. He criticised the government for prolonging a dispute which the RMT was committed to ending, lobbying them for support based on deals the union had struck with the devolved governments.

“In Scotland and Wales, RMT has settled similar disputes with the support of the governments there but where companies are controlled by the DfT, time is running out.”

RMT’s attempt to portray these disputes as victories is refuted by the contents of the agreements they enforced. In the case of ScotRail only 2.2 percent of the pay deal of between 7 and 9 percent was based on the cost of living. The rest incorporated flexible working and productivity strings. At Transport for Wales a proposed 4.5 percent deal was raised to 6.6 percent, but with “productivity elements”.

Lynch’s cited examples of what can be achieved with “reasonable” employers presents the union bureaucracy as the best means for enforcing sub-inflation pay deals and policing ramped up exploitation. Lynch made clear the RMT executive was offering the same to the Tory government if they would only give them a bone to throw to their members to sell such a rotten agreement.

To take control of the dispute and unify the struggles of all rail workers against the divisions enforced by the union apparatus, rank and file committees must be built. This is the only means to unleash the tremendous social power of rail workers and stop the Tory government’s offensive in its tracks.

Contrary to the claim by Lynch that the bellicose

monsters have gone, the Tory government is preparing a state offensive against rail workers, nurses and ambulance drivers deploying army personnel to break strikes and bringing forward legislation to ban strikes through Minimal Service orders. All workers in struggle are now denounced as “stooges” for Putin, betraying the “national unity” demanded by war.

This desperate slander comes from a crisis ridden ruling elite, under siege from a growing strike wave that threatens its plans to escalate its proxy war drive against Russia while enforcing austerity and pay restraint at home.

The resurgence of the class struggle in the UK is part of an international development. In the US, President Biden attempted to enforce a substandard contract against 120,000 rail freight workers with the aid of the union bureaucracy, but rail workers in four unions voted it down. Biden responded by unilaterally imposing the contract and forbidding strike action. The US Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee has been central to opposing the sell-out and rallying the support of the working class internationally in defence of railroad workers.

Workers’ fight for a living wage, sick pay entitlement and job security has no national borders and requires organisational forms through which they can overcome the sabotage of the union apparatus. This is the fight taken up by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge all rail workers wishing to take forward their struggle to make contact today.

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