

40,000 rail workers resume national strike as UK government prepares anti-strike legislation

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Forty thousand members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are striking against Network Rail and 14 train operating companies this week in their seven-month-long battle for a pay rise and against restructuring.

The strike follows a fresh ballot in October to extend action against mass job losses and the overturning of terms and conditions to achieve £2 billion in cuts, as part of the reprivatisation of the rail network.

Two 48-hour strikes on December 13-14 and 16-17 will bring most of the national rail network to a standstill. Members of the white-collar TSSA union are also striking at six of the train companies on the last day of action on Saturday.

Last week the ASLEF union, representing 96 percent of train drivers, received a renewed mandate for strikes at 12 train companies after five days of stoppages since June.

Rail workers are determined to defeat the Tory government's plans, but any collective struggle is being undermined by the rail unions which have bent over backwards to accommodate the employers and the government.

This is the first action by RMT members since the last one-day stoppage on October 8. The union executive overturned three days of strikes in November to pursue pointless talks for a fortnight with Network Rail and the train operators.

The perspective championed by RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch of limited industrial action to reach a negotiated settlement has unravelled. Lynch and the union executive promoted government-brokered talks with the rail employers over a week ago, which ended with an for below-inflation pay deals and the

gutting of jobs, terms and conditions. He went into the talks stating that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government had "got rid of the bellicose monsters we use to have."

After this strategy collapsed, Lynch penned a letter to Sunak on December 9 requesting a meeting with him to end the dispute.

His "Dear Prime Minister" letter stated, "It is now clear to my union and the wider public that No. 10 is directing the mandate for the rail companies and has torpedoed the talks..."

"It's not clear to me why, on top of this, your government has now torpedoed the negotiations, but I now believe that a meeting with yourself represents the best prospect of any renewed progress."

Lynch's mystified pose is in bad faith. From the outset, rail workers knew that the Tory government was seeking to make an example of them by inflicting a defeat as part of its broader offensive against the working class, reprising the stance of Thatcher with the miners in 1984-5.

At Prime Minister's Question Time last week Sunak announced plans to bring forward legislation to outlaw strike action on the rail and transport services through Minimum Services Level legislation.

Far from fighting against this clampdown on workers' rights, the RMT executive has offered its services in demobilising action, pointing to company-union agreements it has reached with the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales. At ScotRail and Transport for Wales the RMT agreed below-inflation deals tied to ramped-up productivity. Lynch cited both deals in his letter to Sunak, having already boosted them as a model for reaching a settlement with

Network Rail and the 14 train operators.

The Sunak government has interpreted these overtures as the surrender terms they represent and has concluded it will make no concessions.

Lynch stated last week that a deal with the train operators was only scuppered after the last-minute inclusion by the government of demands for Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains at all companies. This only shows that the union executive was agreeable to a raft of other measures being pursued by the government, including closure of ticket offices, mandatory Sunday working, and recruitment based on part-time contracts to meet demands for greater “flexibility”.

The replacement of on-board guards with multi-skilled grades undermines their safety-critical role, with drivers forced to assume responsibility for train door operations. It has long been a battleground issue for rail workers. DOO has already been rolled out across half the network, based on agreements struck by the rail unions with train operators.

RMT members covering around 20,000 signalling and maintenance staff at Network Rail rejected the company’s “final and best offer” of a 9 percent pay increase over two years. 63.6 percent voted “no” off an 83 percent turnout in an electronic referendum. The deal included a 50 percent reduction in scheduled maintenance and a 30 percent increase in unsocial hours, which the RMT says Network Rail will try and impose from December 15. The company plans to shed 1,850 jobs among maintenance staff this month through the route favoured by the union, voluntary redundancies, reducing the workforce by around a fifth.

TSSA withdrew strike action by band 5-8 staff and controllers at Network Rail to put the final offer to a vote and is recommending acceptance of the de facto pay cut as “undoubtedly improved”. It is also claiming to have secured job security on the pretext of no compulsory redundancies until 2025.

Strike action by Unite members at seven control rooms scheduled for this week and in January has also been withdrawn after the union pushed through Network Rail’s offer. Throughout the dispute, RMT, ASLEF, TSSA and Unite have worked to block a unified industrial and political offensive.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan responded to

last week’s overwhelming strike vote with a press release stating, “Now we don’t want to go on strike”. He added, “The ball is now firmly in the train companies’ court. And we are calling on the government to help – not hinder – the negotiating process.”

This is the level to which the union bureaucracy has stooped in its efforts to suppress rail workers’ defiance, based on calls for corporatist collaboration with the rail employers and the Tory government.

Lynch has provided a “left” face to this corporatist agenda through his role in fronting the Enough is Enough campaign. Its rallies have served as a vehicle to nullify demands for a general strike and to line workers up behind the right-wing pro-business Labour Party led by Keir Starmer.

At last Friday’s rally of Royal Mail workers called by the Communication Workers Union (CWU), Lynch repeated his appeals to Starmer and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves to support workers on the picket lines. Yet both Starmer and Reeves have assured business leaders they will take no action to repeal any further regressive anti-strike legislation introduced by the Tories. Reeves declared this would be “jumping the gun”.

Rail workers face the need to break from the rotten framework being used to strangle their fight, linking up with the struggles of postal and telecom workers, nurses, civil servants and teachers and the growing legions of workers in the private and public sector who are demanding the defeat of the government’s ruthless class war agenda.

A fight against the Tory government is equally a fight against its de facto coalition partners in Labour. The class struggle requires new and democratic forms of organisation, based on the rank-and-file wresting control from the union bureaucrats and waging an uncompromising fight utilising their tremendous social power. This is the only viable means through which a struggle against the ruthless dictates of the corporate and financial elite can be advanced.



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