

UK rail workers resume strikes as Network Rail declares sell-out deal within “touching distance”

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Tens of thousands of rail workers are striking for five days this week in the long-running fight against the Conservative government-backed restructuring of the network to slash jobs, overturn terms and conditions, undermine safety and extend pay restraint.

The main obstacle to collective action by rail workers remains the trade union apparatus.

Around 40,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) at the rail infrastructure firm Network Rail and at 14 train operating companies are involved in two 48-hour stoppages on January 3-4 and 6-7.

On January 5, thousands of members of the train drivers union ASLEF will strike across 15 train companies. The action is limited to one day in order not to coincide with the RMT stoppages. ASLEF announced the strike action on December 20, after receiving an overwhelming mandate for more strikes. The vote was 93 percent in favour, a larger margin than the original vote leading to five days of stoppages from last July.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan facing criticism from the rank-and-file last October cautioned against “righteous passion among all train drivers” to “throw the kitchen sink at the action.” After nearly four years of a pay freeze with inflation still at a 40 year high, Whelan is calling for nothing more than a “serious and sensible offer.” The ASLEF leadership has also isolated the pay fight of train drivers from the assault on jobs, terms and conditions facing other rail workers in addition to their own pay freeze.

The divisive approach by ASLEF is facilitated by the RMT, which has made no call for joint action between train guards and drivers against the drive by the government and train companies for Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains throughout the network. This is

after the train operators in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) confirmed at government-brokered talks in early December that DOO had to be accepted in principle across the network. This mean its extension to the remaining half of the railways, requiring the downgrading of the safety critical role of the guard and paving the way for thousands more job losses.

The Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA), representing managerial grades and other station staff, organised one-day strikes at Cross Country on December 26 and at Great Western Railway and West Midlands Trains on December 28, and industrial action short of strike action at 10 train operators over the same period. It cited the job losses and ticket office closures as “unacceptable strings” demanded by the RDG attached to the miniscule pay offer of 4 percent for 2022 and the same uplift for this year. The de facto real-terms pay cut of 10 percent and axing of jobs are also faced by RMT members.

A call for unified action would be widely supported and is the only strategy to defeat the employers and government. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in our statement last October, “Rank-and-file must take control of UK rail strike,” “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.”

This is proven by TSSA and Unite pushing through Network Rail’s substandard deal just before Christmas, withdrawing vital control room workers from any further industrial action. Shamelessly, they compared the “best and final” pay offer from Network Rail favourably to that

of the RDG's, based on a pitiful 1 percentage-point difference of 9 percent for two years and claims of job security through an agreement on no compulsory redundancies.

The same deal was rejected by RMT members faced with an immediate implementation of mass redundancies. The caveat of no compulsory redundancies before January 2025 hailed by RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch will prove no obstacle to Network Rail reducing its maintenance workforce by around a fifth, with 1,900 job losses.

Any attempt by the RMT executive to distinguish itself from the rotten role being played by other union leaders is being thoroughly exposed. Lynch is leading the way in promoting a corporatist agreement to defuse a confrontation with the Tory government and accepting further sacrifices demanded by employers.

This week's strike action proceeded despite the best efforts of Lynch to solicit further government brokered talks with Network Rail and the RDG to end the dispute. In a press release on January 2, he again called for the government to allow rail bosses to freely negotiate a settlement.

"The government is blocking the union's attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with the rail employers," he said. 'We have worked with the rail industry to reach successful negotiated settlements ever since privatisation in 1993. And we have achieved deals across the network in 2021 and 2022 where the DfT (Department for Transport) has no involvement."

With privatisation being presented as such a success story, rail workers should be warned that Lynch and the RMT executive are negotiating the terms of a surrender.

During talks with Transport Secretary Mark Harper in mid-December, Lynch told the BBC he accepted that any improvements on the offers from Network Rail and the train operators would have to be "self-generated" from our "members' working practices."

The *Daily Mail*, reporting the then latest negotiations in a December 27 article under the headline, "Rail bosses are hopeful of a positive outcome as union chief Mick Lynch 'softens stance' and 'eyes practical solution'." It cited an insider to the talks stating, "Negotiators are understood to be looking at using language 'creatively,' particularly around reforming the industry, so both sides can better sell a deal."

A source told the newspaper, "Mick has been the most deal-minded he's been. He needs a way out of the dispute."

The use of "creative language" to package sub-standard deals has already been employed by the RMT executive in Scotland and Wales, which Lynch cites as the example for ending the national rail strike. In both cases the below-inflation agreements are higher than the miserly offers from Network Rail and the RDG only because of the productivity strings attached. At ScotRail the pay deal is between 7 and 9 percent and at Transport for Wales 6.6 and 9.5 percent.

As Tuesday's strike began, Lynch made further entreaties to the government, Network Rail and the operators declaring, "We don't want disruption. We want a settlement. There's been too much disruption on the railway caused by Government policy and if we can get sensible proposals we can work up towards a solution." What are being concocted are surrender terms.

Later Tuesday Network Rail chief negotiator Tim Shoveller said a deal was "in touching distance" and required the RMT to sell its membership "the reform elements of this deal." He emphasised, "We want to make sure that we can work with the RMT now to make clarifications where there's been misunderstanding and put the deal out again."

Rail workers cannot stand aside as the RMT, the government and the employers finalise a rotten deal. The blocking of unified action by the rail unions must be opposed and the struggle taken out of their hands.

As the WSWs explained in a December article on an agreement proposed by the RMT in Wales as a template for betraying the UK rail strike, "Rail workers are faced with a joint industrial and political struggle in their fight against the restructuring of the network for a further looting operation by the private operators and the shareholders. Together with postal workers, NHS workers, education workers and millions of others, they must turn to the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus and controlled by the workers themselves. This would enable the working class to unify its struggles throughout the UK and to reach out to their brothers and sisters all over the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)."



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