

UK rail workers speak from the picket lines during most sustained action since start of dispute

Our reporters
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Rail workers completed five days of strike action this week in their continued fight against £2 billion of cuts by the Conservative government, Network Rail and the private train operators.

The strikes were the most sustained action across the network since the beginning of the national dispute last June against a pay freeze which has extended into its third year and the overturning of terms and conditions at the expense of safety and thousands of jobs.

Two blocks of 48-hour strikes on January 2-3 and 6-7 by 40,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) at Network Rail and 14 train companies reduced services to 20 percent of normal capacity.

A one-day stoppage on January 5 by 12,500 members of the drivers' union ASLEF at 15 train companies ground all operations to a halt.

The collective power of rail workers and their determination to fight was clearly demonstrated, but they remained divided by the leadership of both unions.

No further action has been announced at this stage by the RMT or ASLEF, with none of the issues resolved that have provoked the largest rail strikes in over three decades.

The last days of the strike were dominated by the Sunak government bringing forward legislation aimed at making such action illegal through minimum service agreements. The authoritarian measure is a response not only to the deep-seated opposition of rail workers. With nurses and ambulance workers striking before Christmas and results of strike ballots by over half a million teachers in England expected this month, anti-strike laws will be extended to cover eight other sectors including health and education.

Despite this, ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan and RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch are due to attend follow-up talks on Monday convened by Conservative rail minister Huw Merriman with Network Rail and the train companies in the Rail Delivery Group. Both maintain that a negotiated settlement with the rail bosses can be achieved with the backing of a Tory government planning the most extensive state clampdown against workers in British history, surpassing even that carried through by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to rail workers on the picket lines who explained their opposition to escalating social inequality, the attack on the right to strike, and the superprofits of the private operators made while key workers are denigrated, and their support for unified action.

Manchester

Conductor of 26 years **Colin** spoke from the picket line outside Manchester Piccadilly rail station. "The press just lie about the strike. When we came out in February last year we were painted as the bad guys. Now lots of industries are coming out."

He spoke of facing the dilemma of whether to "heat or eat... My neighbours cannot afford to put the heat on. They are retired. If I'm on a day off, they come and sit in my house for a chat and pies. We're probably one of the richest countries in the world, but we've got poverty.

"We're here for our terms and conditions, and for a pay rise." The conductors were supporting other workers "like the gate line staff [ticket collectors], they could just lose their jobs. They help passengers, give them information. The vulnerable, the young will be affected."

Speaking about the proposed closure of neatly 1,000 ticket offices nationally, he continued, "On the early shift, I go to Heaton Chapel. If the booking office is closed, often the ticket machine on the platform is not working, but if you board the train without a ticket you get a £20 fine."

Conductor **John** said a strike by only one group of rail workers at a time was not effective, "Aslef should have come out today." He said of driver only operated (DOO) trains, which do away with the safety-critical role of the conductor, "The pay element is secondary. Some drivers said you could double our pay, but we wouldn't accept DOO. We should have two guards on a train."

"I had an incident on a train," said Colin. "A turbo was blown coming into a tunnel with 300 passengers on board. I'm on my own, evacuating 300 passengers. There's not enough staff."

Speaking about Rishi Sunak becoming prime minister and deepening the government's offensive against rail and other workers, he said, "Do you think it's a democracy? We've now had three prime ministers who've not been voted in."

At Manchester's Victoria station, a conductor of 25 years said, "We're all fighting the same fight. We haven't had a wage rise for three years. I was apologising to passengers on my train for fares going up 6 percent, but my wages haven't gone up. Management say we're being greedy, but we don't want more than we had four years ago. The CEO's pay has gone up to £500,000! If I was a 26-year-old with kids and a mortgage, I couldn't manage.

"It gets worse and worse. Each time a franchise comes up for

renewal, the new company wants to make a profit, so it's down to the bare knuckle. The trains are not running when everyone's in and not on strike! There's supposed to be four trains an hour to London, now it's one an hour."

Comparing cutbacks in the National Health Service and in the rail industry, he continued, "They've knocked the NHS back and wonder why it doesn't work. I can see the same rot's happening here on the railways."

Alan, a conductor at Piccadilly with over 10 years' experience, said, "I think everyone should walk out and not go back until we've won. That's how things got won in the first place, we wouldn't have anything if we hadn't have done that years ago. Look at Amazon workers, if they all came out and all the workers in the supermarkets. They don't know the power they got in their hands. Imagine if they all walked out in the supermarkets Asda, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Morrisons, this country would just stop."

Asked how he thought this fight should be organised he said, "It's got to start with the workers. They can't wait for a union like Usdaw to do something because they might as well be Tesco themselves."

On the issue of the government's announcement of new anti-strike laws including minimum service levels allowing rail networks to run a service during strikes, Alan said, "The western democracies are looking to repressive dictatorships and are saying 'that's what we need to do.' Once you're not free to make your own choice, it's not a democracy. Your rights don't go overnight, they go over time and that's what's been happening over my entire working life."

"The Labour Party are not a party that's going to solve workers' problems. They haven't been for my working life and haven't been for 30 or 40 years."

Wakefield

At the picket line at Wakefield Westgate in west Yorkshire workers discussed the WSWs article "UK government announces new anti-strike laws for education, health, transport, and other workers."

John, a customer experience host, said, "We've been here since day one of the strike. I don't think they are interested in negotiating. We feel our jobs are at risk with all the restructuring. They really have not shifted."

"Our strikes were suspended in November for talks with nothing coming out from them. It was really a dirty trick that was played. It is all about constant restructuring and they keep all the profits. It's the same with all the companies these days."

"All the stuff about how a pay increase is not affordable because it's taxpayers' money is really an oxymoron. We are taxpayers and workers who are the backbone of the country as all key workers have shown through the pandemic."

In relation to the separate strike action called by the RMT, TSSA and ASLEF he said, "We should all be out together rather than separate. There is no way they will listen otherwise."

His colleague added, "No vital public service should be for profit for the benefit of the shareholders—they should be run for the public."

Bournemouth

At Bournemouth station a driver said, "We haven't been offered a pay rise for three years. Even though the union tried to negotiate, the company said there wasn't anything they could offer at all. Now we are exercising our right to withdraw our labour because we believe we've worked hard through the pandemic and with the cost of living we deserve a fair and reasonable wage."

In comments that are an indictment of the train union bureaucracy, the driver said, "Our salary has been created by giving up our terms and conditions to enable services on bank holidays and sociable hours. Those things have been given over a period of years so we've self-funded our salary for years and years and years."

"We've got food bills, heating bills and everybody has less money and there's still the train companies making massive profits. We're just asking for a share of their profits."

"We are at a point where we've negotiated to get rid of things the company want for productivity, and we want to be compensated with a wage increase. And now they're saying they want other things, and they are not prepared to pay for it. And it's not things that we are prepared to give up. An example: they are asking us to put safety last. We're not prepared to do that because it's not them that ends up in a court of law when someone dies, is it? It's us on the front of the train driving it or on the station as a member of staff."

"People may say that we are averse to technology and that's not true. The trains are quite advanced, but the infrastructure is Victorian, and it's not practical to ask people to close the doors and make sure the interface between the platform and the train is safe when it's got a massive gap between the train and the platform and it's on a steep curve."

"It's everybody's fundamental right to withdraw the ability to work, otherwise we are back to paid slavery."

Another driver said, "It was a disgrace that this government is hanging on to power although they do not have a democratic mandate. And they are trying to bring anti-strike legislation against our right to strike."



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