

RMT union directly colluding with UK rail companies to sell out strikes

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Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union General Secretary Mick Lynch is working on a sellout deal with the train companies to end the longest-running strike against the Conservative government.

This takes place behind the backs of rail workers through talks convened by the Sunak government, with only partial reports leaked in the media over the terms of a proposed agreement.

The template for a sellout was set by the talks between the heads of unions in rail, health and education last Monday and department ministers aimed at ending the current strike wave. Lynch, presented as the militant head of a renewed trade union movement, was one of those who took part, alongside Mick Whelan of the ASLEF train drivers union.

The talks went ahead even though the invitation was made alongside the announcement by the government that it was bringing forward plans to criminalise strike action through Minimum Services Levels legislation.

The repressive measures are directed against hundreds of thousands of workers taking strike action, beginning with the rail dispute in June and leading to the highest number of days lost through industrial action since the Thatcher government in 1989.

Lynch and Whelan met with Rail Minister Huw Merriman Monday. The RMT then pursued closed-door talks throughout the week with the representatives of the train companies in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG). Speaking to PA News on Thursday before heading into further talks with the RDG at the offices of First Group in London, Lynch said, "It will be a very tight proposal. It will not be generous. It will be way below inflation, and it will have very onerous conditions on it."

Yet the RMT and RDG are literally speaking from the same script with their joint tight-lipped, two-line statement following Thursday's meeting, reading: 'We have had detailed discussions and we are working jointly

towards a revised offer. Both parties have agreed to continue discussions over the next few days.'

The publication of the statement on the RMT Facebook page produced comments from concerned rail workers. Among those receiving popular likes were:

"Driver only operation and booking office closures need to be off the table to continue the talks."

"No surrender. Don't sell us or the lesser paid grades down the river."

The RMT has made no reply to rank-and-file demands to draw red lines. From the start of the dispute, the only stipulated position on a negotiated settlement from the RMT executive has been no compulsory redundancies and a more reasonable pay offer.

The ability of Lynch to project himself as a militant leader is entirely dependent on the media, both from the right, which portrays him as a left-wing bogeyman, and from those in the Labour Party-supporting *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror*, which seek to uphold the credibility of the union bureaucracy. Both are motivated by a shared anxiety over the growth of the class struggle. Neither have canvassed the opinions of 40,000 rail workers engaged in a now seven-month national strike struggle.

The cynicism of Lynch knows no limits. The RMT published figures prior to this week's talks showing train company profits had increased by £300 million since they were put on new contracts by the government at the start of the pandemic, and were due to rise to £400 million in September.

Lynch commented, 'While executives and the rich make millions, our members are being asked to accept substandard pay offers and a ripping up of their hard fought for terms and conditions, during an escalating cost of living crisis.'

In truth, Lynch has already accepted the framework demanded by the government following previous talks with Merriman in mid-December. Speaking to the BBC,

he replied to a question regarding the negotiating position of the RMT by saying it was not as simple as making demands, but was dependant on “what can be generated through the savings and efficiencies they’re demanding.”

According to media reports, the top rate of what is now on offer is 10 percent over two years--a two percent difference from what has been rejected by railworkers, and a de facto pay cut for last year and for 2023.

During the week, Lynch kept up his grandstanding in appearances before parliament’s Transport Select Committee—specifically over opposing driver only operated (DOO) trains. The RMT had stated that the insertion into a deal put forward by the RDG of the demand for DOO on all train companies by government ministers had “torpedoed” an agreement early last month.

“We will not accept driver-only operation in any company without a fight,” said Lynch. “We will never sign up to accepting DOO. It will never happen while I am general secretary. It will never happen as long as the RMT exists.”

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However, as RDG chair Steve Montgomery pointed out, DOO already exists on 45 percent of the network thanks to the RMT and ASLEF, which worked to demobilise a strike movement by 6,000 guards and thousands of drivers at eight companies across the UK against DOO. Through a series of deals, the RMT agreed to the downgrading of the safety-critical role of guards and conductors, with train door supervision transferred to drivers, while ASLEF agreed to this as a productivity string in drivers’ pay agreements.

Any watered-down version on the DOO demand in a revised offer would be a face-saving device for the RMT granted by the train companies and government. The almost exclusive attention now being paid by the RMT executive to DOO scuppering an agreement has served to distract attention from a raft of other cost-cutting measures. These include mass ticket office closures, mandatory Sunday working, introduction of 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. Regarding the devastating impact of ticket office closures on jobs and passenger safety, the RMT has organised useless petitions to Transport Minister Mark Harper and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

The surrender being negotiated by Lynch makes grotesque the RMT’s pose of leading the fight against the

Sunak government’s anti-strike legislation.

The RMT executive is deliberately undermining a unified struggle against the train companies and Network Rail, the infrastructure company run at arms-length by the government. Last month, RMT members rejected the “best and final offer” from Network Rail of a 1 percent rise on its previous pay offer, to 9 percent over two years, along with mass redundancies, the halving of scheduled maintenance and an increase by 30 percent in unsocial hours.

Network Rail Chief Executive Tim Shoveller already stated in November that up to 1,850 maintenance jobs will be culled through “voluntary” severance, with or without a negotiated settlement. He claimed that the rejection by RMT members was due to a communication problem he aims to counter through a stepped-up propaganda offensive. Shoveller has been able to build on the isolation of RMT members as a result of the Unite and TSSA unions pushing through the substandard deal, withdrawing vital control room staff from further industrial action.

The determination of rail workers to fight has been clearly demonstrated. The RMT has been handed two massive strike mandates by 40,000 rail workers at 14 train companies and Network Rail (20,000 in signalling and maintenance), taking up to 20 days of strike action even as they have received no strike pay.

Throughout the dispute, the Socialist Equality Party has advocated for the formation of rank-and-file committees to take the fight out of the hands of the RMT executive and draw up the necessary red lines on pay, jobs, terms and conditions. Only by taking charge and unifying their struggles can rail workers defeat the £2 billion cuts and re-privatisation drive.



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