

ASLEF and RMT unions announce joint strike by UK train drivers to pre-empt wider mobilisation

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The train drivers' union ASLEF and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) have announced joint strike action for February 1 and 3. The limited stoppages are a feint at unified action and a pale reflection of the opposition they both sit on.

ASLEF and the RMT have both been given renewed strike mandates for the longest running dispute in a strike wave that has gripped the UK since June. Throughout the seven-month action, they have prevented a united struggle against the £2 billion cost-cutting measures demanded by the Conservative government to boost the profits of the train companies in a revamped version of privatisation.

The first day of the action on February 1 coincides with the Trades Union Congress (TUC)'s official national protest over the government's Strikes Bill. But neither union made any direct reference in their announcements to the draconian measures to strip workers of the right to strike through enforced Minimum Service Levels. The rail strikes were one of the main targets of the law, singled out as one of the three sectors first affected.

The token character of the action is underlined by the fact that the RMT has only called out its train driver members, a few hundred workers rather than the 40,000 members covered by the same mandate. This includes 20,000 station and on-board train staff (including conductors) and 20,000 signallers and maintenance workers at Network Rail. They have taken up to 20 days of strike action but will not be included in the planned February stoppages by around 12,000 train drivers in ASLEF at 15 train operating companies (TOCs). The combined action would have brought the entire network to a standstill.

For the RMT Executive, the show of opposition in February is to preclude further action by 40,000 of its members which would cut across the closed-door talks with the employers in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and Network Rail. Talks have continued this week, with the RMT refusing to answer members' demands for red lines on jobs, terms and conditions.

In the same press release he announced the strikes, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch stated, "Our negotiations will continue with the rail operators to create a package on jobs, conditions and pay that can be offered to our members."

Lynch, hailed as a militant workers' leader by the media and pseudo-left groups, is working intimately with the rail employers and the government on a sell-out deal while rank-and-file workers have been kept in the dark.

The entire framework of negotiations has been set by the government and accepted by Lynch, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned. Transport Secretary Mark Harper stated Monday that the government had given "permission" for a "revised mandate" to the TOCs to negotiate with the unions, insisting that "it is important that we get generational reform both on the maintenance side of the operation for Network Rail but also for the rail companies."

The results of this collusion have now been made clear. A summary of the new proposed settlement was provided by Lynch to the membership in a union circular.

Pay has only been revised upwards by 1 percent from the December negotiations, with 5 percent for last year and 4 percent for 2023—a staggering pay cut in real terms.

A “no compulsory redundancies” clause has been extended from April to the end of 2024. On Driver Only Operation, there was carefully worded fudge. Rather than the previous blanket demand for its introduction, it will be imposed on a company-by-company basis in the same way as has already happened across half the rail network.

Even the below-inflation pay deal and a delay in compulsory redundancies is made conditional on restructuring measures that will eliminate hundreds of jobs and tear up terms and conditions.

These include the closure of all station ticket offices (subject to a statutory consultation exercise) and repurposing, with displaced staff to be multi-skilled; the creation of a different salary structure for new entrants; station staff to be deployed across a group of stations rather than a home station; mandatory Sunday working; no additional payment for working with new technology; reduced annual leave and a revision of sick pay for those with less than 5 years’ service.

Lynch stated that this scorched earth policy against jobs and workers’ rights would “require serious and careful consideration”, with the RMT National Executive Committee (NEC) to report back next week.

The only concern for Lynch is whether the RMT leadership can risk putting these surrender terms to a vote without losing all credibility.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan confirmed the two-day strike action in February after attending talks last Monday with Rail Minister Huw Merriman alongside Lynch. But all ASLEF was offered by the RDG was the same massively below inflation deal rejected in December by the RMT—4 percent for last year and the same for this year. This was the first offer made to ASLEF after six days of strike action in the first national strike by train drivers in 35 years. The proposals were leaked in the Murdoch-owned *Sun* newspaper prior to the talks to present rejection as proof that the union was not prepared to negotiate.

Whelan has been stemming demands for an escalation of action from train drivers since the start of the strikes, which he derided as throwing “the kitchen sink at the action.”

He said of the derisory offer in a January 17 press release, “Not only is the offer a real-terms pay cut, with inflation running north of 10%, but it came with so many conditions attached that it was clearly

unacceptable.” However, in the next sentence he committed himself to further negotiations backed by the government, writing, “it is time the companies – encouraged, perhaps, by the government – sat down with us and got serious. That is the way – and the only way – to end this dispute.”

Both the RMT and ASLEF, despite one being advanced as militant and the other conservative, carry out the same function of policing a rising tide of class struggle.

Regarding the anti-strike legislation, Whelan joins the TUC and Labour Party in warning the ruling class that the Tories risk provoking widespread action the unions will be unable to control. He writes, “The government’s own previous impact assessment... says there is a risk of ‘an increased frequency of strikes following a minimum service level being agreed’.”

Lynch subordinates opposition to the same political appeals to avoid an escalation of class struggle. The RMT-led protest rally Monday over the second reading of the Strikes Bill outside 10 Downing Street once again suffered a “Where is Keir Starmer?” political vaudeville act led by Lynch.

No genuine workers’ leader would call on the head of a Labour Party even more right-wing and pro-business than during the days of Tony Blair to come to the head of a movement against repressive anti-worker legislation, or claim that anything positive will emerge from closed-door meetings with employers and a government at war with the entire working class.



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