

UK rail workers denounce train companies' "best and final offer" being considered by RMT union

Tony Robson
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Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members have expressed widespread opposition to the “best and final offer” from the train operating companies (TOCs) announced last Thursday.

Around 40,000 RMT members—including station staff, conductors and other on-board crew, signallers and maintenance workers—have waged strikes over the past eight months against an extended pay freeze and a £2 billion cost cutting programme.

The “Dispute Resolution Agreement” from the 14 TOCs represented by the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) ties Workforce Change to a two year pay deal worth less than half the rate of inflation of 5 percent for last year and 4 percent for 2023. This represents a single percent uplift on the proposed offer in early December with the guarantee of any job losses via voluntary severance extended a few months from April to December 31, 2024.

The RMT published a press release last Thursday with a message from General Secretary Mick Lynch which omitted to mention this represented a final demand from the TOCs, describing it as a “fresh offer.”

The RMT said, “The proposals on pay and job security are directly conditional on cost savings and alterations to contractual terms, entitlements, and working practices.”

The press release ended with Lynch stating, “The National Executive Committee will be considering this matter and has made no decision on the proposals nor any of the elements within them.”

“We will give an update on our next steps in due course.”

No update has come since then.

Rail workers are entitled to ask what “pay

proposals”—what is on offer is a de facto pay cut after a 3-year freeze—and what “job security”, as 800 jobs are already earmarked to be axed in the deal.

Even this pay rise is to be “self-financing”, i.e., paid for with cuts and speed-ups.

The offer represents the biggest onslaught on rail workers since privatisation to deliver a revamped version for the Conservative government.

The measures contained in the proposed deal summarised in the press release include:

- All station ticket offices to be closed or “re-purposed” (subject to consultation)
- The creation of a Multi-Skilled Station Grade where station staff will be deployed across a group rather than based at a station, with “a new salary structure” for new entrants and “some salary protections” for existing staff.
- Removal of the blanket demand for Driver Only Operation, but with individual TOCs to decide—which has seen DOO rolled out across half the network already and threatens thousands of guards’ jobs.
- Mandatory Sunday working “when rostered, if cover cannot be provided.”
- A joint review of rail workers terms brought over from British Rail (BR) “to align with modern practices.”
- No payment for the introduction of new technology.
- Annual leave entitlements reduced through the inclusion of Christmas Day and Boxing Day.
- To reinforce a two-tier workforce new entrants will be hired on flexible working contracts with fewer entitlements to sick pay.

According to Lynch it is down to the executive to

deliberate over the next steps. While claiming time is being allowed for the membership to see the details, no online meetings have been arranged as was the case with the strike ballots.

This is to avoid scrutiny by 40,000 members who have taken up to 20 days of action, as it is clear the Tory government has made no real concessions.

Within hours of the RMT publishing the press release on its Facebook page, hundreds of hostile comments were posted rejecting the proposed deal, describing it as a “joke”, “insulting” and a “disgrace.” Comments including the following:

- “It’s a ‘no’ from me. Shocking offer and no guarantee we’ll have a job come Jan 1st, 2025.”
- “So in other words real term pay cut and sell all current conditions that benefit you as a worker. NO”
- “It’s a big fat NO from me even though I’m reaching retirement we need to protect the newbies.”
- “The fact they’re trying to say they need to make changes, cuts, savings and all the rest of it to be able to pay for pay rises is bollocks and doesn’t get called out enough. It’s just an excuse to make the changes they want. How about using some of those profits to fund it? Ah but they won’t sacrifice anything from their own pocket will they”
- “After reading all the main offer, and the appendix my answer is No. They are basically ripping up all our T&C’s and taking control of our lives. If this was accepted we wouldn’t have a home life. We would be owned by the TOC’s. If it goes to a vote. Its No from me.”

With almost a week passing since the offer was made public, rail workers are demanding an update on the position of the RMT executive. A comment posted yesterday on the RMT’s official Twitter account asked, “What’s happening? When will RMT reject it or put to vote on it be announced? It’s the talk in messrooms up and down the country we just need an announcement.”

The RMT’s perfunctory reply stated, “It is still being considered by our NEC. Once we have any information we will share it immediately.”

Behind the tub thumping and “left” rhetoric, Lynch has promoted a corporatist deal with the TOCs and Conservative government from day one. Evasive references to job security and a “reasonable” pay offer have served as a window dressing behind which a partnership with the rail bosses could be secured for the

union bureaucracy.

In the event of a ballot being called on the offer, rail workers should deliver an emphatic “No”. But this is not enough. Lynch and the executive have led the determined fight by rail workers down a dead end.

The WSWs warned of the implications of the sub-standard deals reached between the RMT and the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales at the end of last year. Lynch, who has declared “the working class will never be poor again” as a result of the struggle mounted by the unions, hailed these below inflation agreements with productivity strings as a victory.

The main content of his criticism of the Tory government was that it was not prepared to allow the union to negotiate with the TOCs and Network Rail to end the strikes in England on a similar basis.

The dispute must be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees—democratically accountable to RMT members—must be created, which will draw up demands to protect workers interests not the profits of the TOCs.

Rail workers are engaged in a political struggle, underscored by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak bringing forward the draconian Minimum Services Levels (Strikes Bill) with rail workers among the first targets.

In a statement produced by the Socialist Equality Party last October, “Rank-and-file must take control of the UK rail strike”, the SEP outlined a strategy to mobilise rail workers alongside the growing strike movement in opposition to the Tory government and its de facto Labour allies now being stifled by the union bureaucracy.

We insisted, “The jobs and terms and conditions of rail workers are non-negotiable to feed another profit frenzy and dismantling of safety. The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of the major transport companies, the seizure of their fortunes and their conversion to public ownership under the democratic control of the working class.”



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