

RMT union stifling opposition to UK train companies and Network Rail final offers

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union announced last Thursday its rejection of final offers from the 14 train operating companies (TOCs) in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and the government-operated infrastructure company Network Rail.

The proposed deal, including sweeping attacks on jobs, terms and conditions, was announced January 19 by the RDG. It has taken three weeks for the RMT National Executive Committee (NEC) to even formulate a response. This is virtually unheard-of in any industrial dispute and is especially noteworthy given that strike action by 40,000 rail workers since last June is viewed by workers as the spearhead of the fight against the Conservative government.

For weeks, rail workers demanded to know what there was in the RDG deal that was worth “considering”—the term used by the union executive and General Secretary Mick Lynch to excuse its delayed response.

The sub-inflation pay deal of 9 percent for two years is conditional on a scorched-earth offensive against rail workers’ historically won rights. This includes the closures of all station ticket offices, with station staff turned into an entirely flexible workforce. The commitment to no compulsory redundancies only lasts until the end of 2024 and includes a redeployment process under the threat of dismissal.

A gutting of on-board catering facilities is envisaged and a three-tier wage system for guards and conductors, with drastic cuts in sick pay. Sunday working will become mandatory across the network. Any carryover protections from British Rail for senior rail workers following privatisation in 1993 would be phased out.

Network Rail’s revised offer is based on the same headline pay proposal of the RDG, rejected by an almost 2-1 majority by RMT members in December. The response of management has been to announce it will proceed unilaterally with its “Modernising Maintenance”

programme. This includes a 50 percent reduction in scheduled maintenance and 30 percent increase in unsocial hours, with a cull of 1,850 jobs under the guise of voluntary severance.

The announcement by the RMT executive of the rejection followed what it described as an in-depth consultation exercise with the membership over the RDG deal.

In a video address, Lynch struck a pose of intransigence, insisting the dispute remained “live” and calling for rail workers to “dig in.” In the RMT press release he stated, “the message we have received loud and clear is to reject these dreadful offers.”

Claims that the membership had been listened to were refuted by the fact that instead of strike action, Lynch announced further talks with the employers.

The war of attrition the RMT is waging is not against the rail employers, but the opposition within its own ranks. For all the talk of the dispute being “live,” the February 10 circular to members refers only to initiating preparations for a re-ballot! This is not required until May, with the RMT receiving a larger mandate for strike action in November than it did at the start of the dispute last May.

A grinding-down operation is in full swing, with Lynch to report back on Wednesday following further talks on the “next steps in this campaign including further strike action.”

In its summary of the consultation exercise, the RMT lists responses from 60 branches and 300 workplace representatives but only one online meeting of 100 members.

An indication of the opposition the RMT is sitting on was provided by the *Daily Telegraph* leaking a union memo citing resolutions from three branches in the northwest, East Midlands and northeast of England. These called for strike action every Saturday and included a call

for continuous strike action for three days from May 1, international workers day.

The Newcastle branch charged that the RMT was not living up to its stated principles:

“Having consulted the union’s rule book...(it) stipulates the following—to work for the suppression of the capitalist system by socialistic order of society to improve the conditions and protect the interests of its members.”

“It is evident from our perspective that we have failed in our pursuit to deliver these key objectives, demands and principles and as such, Newcastle rail and catering branch reaffirms its opening statement that we reject these proposals outright and continue with an industrial strategy until such time as we prevail.”

The *Telegraph* stated with dismay, “Hopes had been raised that the RMT was close to pay deals with the train operators and Network Rail,” but, “feedback from branch leaders, however, suggests renewed support for further industrial action.”

The house organ of the Tory Party had its expectations lifted by the conciliatory approach adopted by Lynch, which was then thwarted by the RMT membership.

Sections of the right-wing media have made a bogeyman of Lynch, but as the *Telegraph* is forced to acknowledge, sentiment is well to his left among rail workers.

Lynch waxes lyrical now about “rotten deals” and rejecting “puny pay offers,” but consistently promoted the talks producing this disastrous outcome. He declared after an initial meeting last November with the new Transport Secretary Mark Harper that the Tory government “had got rid of the bellicose monsters we used to have.”

Talks with the rail employers have centred around trying to provide a face-saving deal for the RMT executive while it accepts the framework demanded by the Tory government. All this has yielded from the RDG is a one percentage point change in the pay offer and an extension of the life span of no compulsory redundancy by six months. In December, Lynch admitted a pay settlement would be “self-generated” through “savings” and “working practices” and, in January, that the deal would be “below inflation” and based on “onerous conditions.”

The RMT states that it will go back into talks based on “an acceptable pay offer, and a guarantee of no redundancies and no detrimental changes being imposed on members terms and conditions and working practices.”

In response, Harper stated, “It is now clear that no

realistic offer is ever going to be good enough for the RMT leadership.” The government would now press ahead with the Great British Railways re-privatisation project, which had stalled since the downfall of Boris Johnson as prime minister.

The TOCs were bailed out by the government in the pandemic with £16 billion. This is now to be clawed back through a historic attack on rail workers’ jobs, terms and conditions.

Lynch will not mobilise his members in a direct fight against the government because it would cut across his ongoing attempts to kindle illusions in Labour as anything other than a right-wing party of big business just as hostile to working class as the Tories.

Rail workers need to take the dispute out of the hands of the RMT executive which is strangling it. Rank-and-file committees must be established to determine the course of action and draw up demands for a pay rise and defence of terms and conditions against the restructuring and re-privatisation agenda.

Appeals must in particular be made by the rail workers in the RMT for unity with train drivers in ASLEF, over the heads of the union bureaucracy. They are confronted with a below-inflation offer of just eight percent for two years from the RDG in return for concessions on terms and conditions. Since last summer, co-ordinated action has been kept to a bare minimum, with the strikes on February 1 and 3 of over 12,000 train drivers in ASLEF restricted to joint action with a few hundred train drivers in the RMT.

The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of rail, with the fortunes of the TOCs returned to the public purse to fund an affordable transport system under the democratic control of the working class.



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