

RMT union pulls March 16 UK strike action at Network Rail to ballot over repackaged sellout

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has withdrawn strike action by around 20,000 signallers and maintenance workers at Network Rail planned for March 16.

The one-day stoppage was to take place alongside a strike of another 20,000 RMT members at 14 train operating companies (TOCs) in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG). This action by station and on-board staff including train guards is currently still scheduled to go ahead, with further strikes planned for March 18 and 30 and April 1, But the union has made itself available for talks with the RDG.

The RMT cancelled the Network Rail strike to ballot on a revised offer from the company, making the announcement March 7 before releasing any details of its content. Highlights were provided in a press release the following day. The union then announced that a “referendum” would be held March 9 to March 20.

Even based on the RMT’s selective highlights, the headline pay increase is a 1 percent improvement on what General Secretary Mick Lynch previously described as a “dreadful offer”.

Workers rejected a deal of 9 percent over two years (5 percent for 2022 and 4 percent for 2023) by 63 percent, in a ballot of RMT members at Network Rail last December. The RMT national executive refused to put a further “revised” offer to a vote in February on the grounds that it was essentially the same proposal. It instead organised a consultation exercise with members, who rejected the 9 percent for two years at both Network Rail and with the RDG.

Rail workers were in particular opposed to the sweeping attacks on jobs and terms and conditions, including mass closures of ticket offices and

introduction of a multi-tiered system of lower paid guards, to which the (sub-inflation) award was tied.

Now Lynch and the RMT executive have brought back another offer, which they are not formally recommending but are presenting in a positive light.

The union’s press release refers to “extra money” and refers to an uplift of an “additional 1.1 percent on basic earnings and increased backpay” over the previous deal of between 9.2 percent and 14.4 percent (for the lowest paid). Spread over two years, this is still massively below inflation.

The union has also tried to give the impression that the deal is not tied to changes in working practices. It states the pay offer is “not conditional on accepting Network Rail’s modernising maintenance agenda which the RMT does not endorse.”

The only reason it is not “conditional” is because Network Rail has already announced that “modernising maintenance” would be implemented with or without agreement.

The RMT has previously described the plans to cut around 1,950 jobs and halve scheduled maintenance as “an accident waiting to happen.” Now, in the video address regarding the ballot by RMT Assistant General Secretary and National Lead on Network Rail, the Stalinist Eddie Dempsey, stated that a vote to accept would settle all aspects of the dispute, adding meekly, “We may be able to continue to challenge modernising maintenance in the company processes and raising our concerns with the regulator.”

Lynch and the RMT bureaucracy’s actions have been welcomed in the corporate media for the retreat being sounded and the door it opens to ending rail workers’ long and determined fight.

The *Financial Times* writes, “Senior industry executives were taken by surprise by the RMT’s decision to put the offer to members, sparking optimism that a deal to solve a separate dispute with the train companies was also now possible... The decision marked a significant change in the RMT’s position, which less than a month ago called for ‘unconditional’ pay offers without reforms built in.”

Sky News commented on how “highly significant” it was that the RMT was not making a recommendation on the Network Rail offer after the rejection of previous offers. It described the latest offer as “suspiciously close” to the previous one, adding that the higher percentage increases cited by the RMT amounted to a repackaged version of the previous ones presented by Network Rail. “The numbers are just differently presented by both sides but add up the same.”

Far from Network Rail abandoning the self-financing of the pay deal through changes to working practices, Sky News noted, “That would appear to be at odds with what some of the media appear to have been briefed in recent days. Network Rail has always been clear that reform of working practices is essential if the railways are to have a viable future and has argued that its ability to offer RMT members more would be improved were they prepared to sign up to reforms.”

Rail workers have noted that the actions of the RMT national executive is driving a wedge between their joint struggle against Network Rail and the RDG. With Network Rail operating throughout the planned strike days of the other half of the RMT’s membership, their action will be far less effective.

The undermining of their strike is aided and abetted by the train drivers’ union ASLEF, with General Secretary Mick Whelan sitting on a mandate and not announcing any further strike dates since the last stoppages on February 1 and 3. Train drivers are facing equally unacceptable demands for concessions, with the last offer from the RDG being 8 percent over two years tied to productivity strings.

RMT members at Network Rail should vote down this rotten deal. All rail workers should close ranks in opposition to the divide-and-conquer strategy of the employers and the RMT and ASLEF bureaucracies. It would be naïve to assume the RMT will not follow the ballot at Network Rail by bringing back a similarly repackaged version of the deal from the RDG.

This sabotage and betrayal must be challenged. From the outset, the agenda of the Conservative government has been to re-privatise the rail system through its Great British Railways agenda, based on a scorched earth policy against terms and conditions and a mass jobs cull. Rail workers are in the fight of their lives—a fight they share with workers across the UK and internationally, against governments determined to implement another round of austerity.

A major factor in the RMT’s decision to call off the strike—as part of a wave of cancellations in recent weeks—will have been the eruption of workers’ struggles across Europe, which threaten to blow apart the unions’ strategy of securing corporatist “negotiated settlements” with the government and the employers at workers’ expense.

Rail workers in France are part of a general strike movement of millions against President Macron’s pension cuts. In Greece, the rail and public sector unions have conducted a general strike following a rail crash last week that claimed the lives of 57 people, pointing the finger at years of de-staffing, underfunding and privatisation. Major strikes have also gathered steam in Germany, Italy and Belgium.

The conditions exist for an international working-class struggle against the looting of wages and public finances to grow the fortunes of the super-rich and the arsenals of the world’s militaries and for cost-of-living wage increases and safe, effective and affordable public services.

The trade union bureaucracy in every country is a bulwark against this joint fight. The power to conduct strikes and protests must be taken out of its hands and transferred to the rank-and-file through its own democratically elected committees, which will reach out to their class brothers and sisters across the world. This is the programme fought for by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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