

Collapse of UK rail union/company talks forces additional strikes by RMT and ASLEF

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union has called a further 24-hour strike to be held on May 13 in its long-standing dispute with Britain's train operating companies (TOCS).

ASLEF, the train drivers' union, has called another three strike days on May 12, May 31, and June 3.

Calling the RMT strike, General Secretary Mick Lynch said it was the result of a breakdown in talks between the rail companies and the union. In a video circulated on the RMT's social media, Lynch said, "Today we met with the RDG [Rail Delivery Group] again, and they clarified to us their position on the dispute resolution procedure, which we've been considering around the union for last couple of weeks."

Lynch asserted that a previous "two-stage" agreement, centring on a 5 percent pay deal and a £1,750 uplift, with the unions entering a dispute resolution procedure, had been torpedoed by the TOCs. "What they have said to us, is that we will not be able to take the first stage payment and then enter into the negotiations on the second stage..."

"What they're now saying to us is that we would have to terminate our dispute, end all industrial action and terminate our industrial action mandate... we regard their position as renegeing and reversing on what is in that document."

The RMT organises around 40,000 guards, signallers and track maintenance workers. Lynch said that the union's small minority of several hundred train drivers had been offered an even worse agreement—one "equally as onerous as those for the other grades" that "will mean fundamental changes to the way our drivers work, to the way new entrants are rewarded in terms of salary, training packages and so forth."

Lynch added that the TOCs now "seek to impose upon us those detrimental terms and conditions which

they are offering in return for a very poor pay rise of 4%."

The RMT leader concluded, "the development is entirely unacceptable and that the dispute resolution process is now of no use to us as a union. That means that we will not enter into that dispute resolution process and the union has rejected the document. We've also rejected the document that affects our driver members."

This is a volte face by Lynch. For almost two weeks, since holding an online "TOC's Dispute Update" April 14, the RMT had maintained that it was on the cusp of settling the longest running of all the disputes in the UK, in total involving over a million workers in the private and public sectors—one ongoing since June 21 last year.

In the online meeting, Lynch and Assistant General Secretary John Leach portrayed the proposed deal, used as the basis for calling off two remaining strike days on March 30 and April 1, in the best possible light. An RMT statement said after a "proposal was tabled" by the employers, it "could lead to a resolution to resolve the current national rail dispute through a new offer." The RMT bureaucracy had already sold out, the previous month, its 20,000 strong Network Rail membership by recommending a massively below inflation deal, also spread over two years.

The latest announcement confirms that the central claim used by the RMT to boost the proposed rotten deal was a fraud. Replying in the April 14 meeting to a question as to how the updated offer differs from previously rejected offers, Leach said, "The fundamental change in this offer from the one that we previously looked at in the same way and rejected is it comes in two parts."

Previously, "In return we had to pre-agree to a

number of workforce reforms, the closure of ticket offices, driver only operation, a fundamental review of all former British Rail terms and conditions of employment, and a whole range of other workforce reforms... What's changed is that the current proposal, the one that we've got this week, is not saying that."

A "number of those proposals that they put in the previous agreement, which were driver-only operation, closure of the ticket offices, the review of British Rail terms and conditions, have actually been pushed off the deal, they're no longer in the offer," he declared

Based on this claim, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, "These changes are only not included in the proposed deal so the RMT can present it as a victory, but all of them will proceed thanks to the refusal of the union to mobilise a genuine fight by railworkers to defeat Network Rail, the TOCs and the Tories."

It now turns out that there was no "two-stage" deal leaving the possibility of renewed strike action open, and the RMT was engaged in either wishful thinking or wilful deception of its members.

If Lynch et al believed the TOCs had offered them a tiny olive branch, which he now claims that the Conservative government has forced them to withdraw, this only proves that the government and the TOCS, which have worked in tandem from day one, are serious about inflicting a defeat on rail workers whereas the RMT only wants an excuse for imposing a betrayal.

The Tories want to use the rail workers as an example to all workers that they must accept the destruction of their pay, terms and conditions. This was the meaning of this week's statement by the Bank of England's chief economist Huw Pill that workers need to "stop trying" to keep up with the spiralling cost of living and "accept they are worse off".

The RMT acts as an industrial police force in controlling its members and preventing an effective fightback. This was made explicit this week during Lynch's appearance at a parliamentary committee discussion on the Minimum Service Levels Bill, currently being legislated. This forces workers in some sectors to agree minimum service levels when strike action is taking place, beginning with the rail network and emergency services but ready to be imposed throughout the economy.

Speaking alongside ASLEF leader Mick Whelan and Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) policy

officer Rob Jenks, Lynch warned the employers and Tory government, "If we can't use traditional industrial action, there will be novel forms of action, and there will be wildcat action, which is what happens in France, and Italy, and Spain and elsewhere... It's gonna come back on the Conservatives' heads I believe."

Lynch made a devastating admission regarding the impact of the RMT's mis-leadership of the rail strikes, stating that its members had returned to "where we've been throughout the dispute, that the companies at the behest of the Tory government are seeking to impose drastic changes and detrimental changes to your conditions and your working life."

This is at the same time an indictment of the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, which held Lynch aloft as the representative of a new and militant fighting leadership in the trade unions. Instead of leading a rebirth of the unions, Lynch follows the well-worn path of his fellow bureaucrats in trying to impose sell-out agreements.

If he now feels forced to organise a one-day strike and pause the RMT's efforts to end the dispute, it is because he fears the angry response this would generate. The past weeks have seen an explosion of opposition among posties against the Communication Workers Union's (CWU) attempt to secure backing for a rotten agreement ending their dispute with Royal Mail.

Last summer, CWU leader Dave Ward was given pride of place at rallies instigating the RMT/CWU-led "Enough is Enough" campaign. Today, a group of postal workers have formed the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, and are saying that they have had enough of Ward and the CWU executive and want to take charge of their own fate. We urge rail workers to follow their lead and form their own rank-and-file committee.



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