

UK rail strikes continue as unions call on Conservative government to resolve dispute

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Rail workers in Britain are taking 48 hours of strike action this weekend, the latest stoppages in a now year-long dispute over low pay and the decimation of jobs, wages and conditions.

On Friday, more than 20,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) began a 24-hour strike in England. On Saturday, around 12,000 train drivers in the ASLEF union will strike. The drivers' strike will be the second this week, following a 24-hour walkout Wednesday.

The RMT stoppage hit 14 train operating companies (TOCs), with around 50 percent of services affected and thousands of trains cancelled. Soccer's FA Cup Final being held in London Saturday will be heavily affected due to tens of thousands of supporters having to travel to the capital from the north west of England.

The Aslef strikes target 16 TOCs, halting around 60 percent of services.

The rail strikes began last June with a series of 24-hour stoppages organised by the RMT against rail infrastructure group Network Rail and 14 train operating companies. They were the first in what became a strike wave encompassing rail, postal, telecom and education workers, National Health Service staff and civil servants. Many of these strikes have been sold out by the union bureaucracy or face betrayal. Had the RMT bureaucracy under Mick Lynch had its way the rail dispute would already be over.

In March the RMT sold out its 20,000 strong Network Rail membership—recommending a massively below inflation deal, spread over two years.

This was followed by the RMT leadership calling off two planned strikes, set for March 30 and April 1, as it moved to present a rotten sell-out it had concluded with the train operating companies in the most positive light—with claims they had extracted a number of

concessions from the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) representing the private train operators.

The RMT was prepared to accept a “two stage” deal, with a way below inflation 5 percent agreement in the first year and 4 percent in the next. It claimed this would mean they could resolve outstanding issues over terms and conditions with the rail companies in the second stage while leaving the possibility of renewed strike action open.

On April 27, the RMT was forced to acknowledge that no such deal was on the table with Lynch stating, “What they’re [RDG] now saying to us is [in order for the agreement to proceed] that we would have to terminate our dispute, end all industrial action and terminate our industrial action mandate...”

The RMT's several hundred train drivers were being offered an even worse agreement 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,” said Lynch.

The union bureaucracy claimed the deal had been scuppered by the Conservative government and that if the TOCs were allowed to negotiate in good faith, the dispute would be over. But the TOCs have the same agenda as the Tories in ensuring a re-privatisation of the rail network based on cuts in pay, terms and conditions, and the imposition of mass job losses. This would see the roll-out of driver only operated trains across the remaining 50 percent of the railway, with thousands of train guards made redundant and the loss of thousands of jobs through the closure of the ticket office at every UK station.

Far from escalating industrial action, the union has held just one further 24-hour strike on May 13, followed by the single day of action this week. As the May 13 strike began, the RMT called for an “industry

summit of unions, employers and government, with an independent chair if necessary, to end chaos on the railways and resolve the toxic rail dispute.” The union also gave evidence to Parliament in which it warned that planned Minimum Services Legislation—a fundamental attack on the right to strike—“would worsen industrial relations and prolong disputes.”

Rebutting its own claims of a conflict between the government and the TOC’s, the RMT revealed that it had written to the government’s transport secretary saying the dispute had “cost taxpayers and the economy an eye watering £1.25bn whilst private train companies make hundreds of millions in profits with bumper pay rises for rail bosses.” The May 13 statement added, “It has been business as usual for the private train companies who stand to have made over £400m in taxpayer funded profits by the end of the year with bosses receiving pay rises of between 15 – 275 per cent.”

Ahead of Friday’s strike Lynch claimed in a video address to members that “our dispute has achieved a great deal,” as he announced that the union would soon enter new talks with the RDG in “good faith”. Presenting the proposed 4 and 5 percent annual pay deals as an achievement—when inflation is currently over 13 percent—he declared, “Let’s not forget that the initial stance of the government and the round delivery group included a mere 2 pay increase for everyone.”

He claimed that the rail companies were no longer interested in bringing in driver only operation services, or in cutting catering services and restructuring fleet engineering, and that the negotiations had stopped their plans to “close every ticket office, at every station on the network from October 2022.”

The RMT had stopped company plans to bring in “new contracts of employment for all staff with additional compulsory hours to cover mandatory Sunday working; had halted plans, to cut thousands of our members jobs for redundancy. And of course they want you to accept the railways pension scheme, with massive cuts to benefits and increases to your contributions.”

None of this is true, with the train profiteers happy to impose a rock bottom pay deal at this juncture in order to impose these attacks once the strike is ended and in collaboration with the RMT.

An RMT statement published Friday said that Lynch

had written to all MPs, including 354 Tories, stating, “While businesses and unions want an agreement, the government insist the [£5 billion] cost to the economy of strike action is a price worth paying.” Instead of “squandering billions of pounds on a futile war against the rail unions... parliamentarians should write to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to insist the government facilitate an improved offer that will protect staffing and services and deliver a fairer deal for rail workers.”

Lynch held out as a model the fact that “there is no strike action on railways controlled by the Scottish and Welsh governments because these [Scottish National Party and Labour Party-run] governments have adopted a fair and less ideological approach to industrial relations.”

In opposition to a unified offensive, the RMT and ASLEF bureaucracy have mostly held sporadic 24-hour strikes, not co-ordinated and held on separate days. The pay and conditions of London Underground workers are likewise under assault with an existing strike mandate in place until the end of June, yet no action is set to take place despite them also being in the RMT.

Workers in both main rail unions have voted to strike and then renewed a six-month mandate as demanded by anti-strike legislation. But thanks to the union bureaucracy, the strikes have achieved *nothing*.

The rail dispute is one of two main struggles at the centre of Britain’s strike wave, alongside that of 115,000 postal workers. Both are heading to defeat. Rail workers must now take the dispute out of the hands of the RMT through the formation of an independent rank and file committee.

As the Communication Workers Union (CWU) tried to push through its sell-out of the postal workers struggle based on a rotten agreement with Royal Mail, a group of workers established their own rank-and-file committee to prevent a defeat in an ongoing battle. We urge rail workers to take the same course. The Socialist Equality Party urges rail workers to fill in the form below and discuss the formation of a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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