

RMT rail union advances no opposition to closure of nearly all 1,000 ticket offices

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Nearly every railway station ticket office in Britain is to be closed. The decision of the Railway Delivery Group (RDG), representing all private rail operators, will remove a vital service from the public with thousands of job losses.

Only a few of the 1,007 stations in England will remain open, on reduced hours, following a phoney 21-day “passenger consultation” process.

Some workers will be temporarily reallocated provided they are amenable to “transitioning to multi-skilled ‘customer help’ roles” in stations, but thousands will be made redundant. The process has already begun, with the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) reporting that “hundreds of redundancy notices” are already being sent to ticket office workers.

Peter Pendle, the interim joint general secretary of the TSSA management and administration worker union, told the BBC he had received “half a dozen communications from the various train operating companies, South Western Trains and GWR included, both issuing Section 188 notices which is the notice you have to give as a first stage to consult on redundancies”.

According to data seen by the *World Socialist Web Site*, at Great Western Rail alone management are considering a projected reduction in headcount from 1,092 to 740—a loss of 352 jobs.

The majority of rail tickets (88 percent) are now bought online. Almost half of all stations already have no ticket office. The Department of Transport runs 1,766 train stations in England, of which 759 (43 percent) already operate without one.

However ticket offices still play an invaluable role, in particular for the disabled and those with accessibility issues. And millions of tickets are still sold at ticket office. Oxford rail station, not among the UK’s largest,

still sold over 250,000 tickets over the counter last year. London’s Paddington station sold almost 600,000 tickets, with over 122,000 bookings collected at the station.

Around three out of five English stations have a ticket office, with most owned and run by train operators. In the largest cities, the impact will be devastating. In London, more than 150 ticket offices are set to close with just five remaining open—Blackfriars, East Croydon, Finsbury Park, London Victoria and Sutton. The UK’s second largest city Birmingham sees closures at its two largest stations, Birmingham International and Grand Central. In Greater Manchester, a region with a population of over 3 million, 58 ticket offices are to close including at one of the busiest stations in Britain, Piccadilly.

The accelerated closure programme is driven by the intensifying drive for profits and helps lay the framework for the re-privatisation of the rail network under the proposed Great British Railways plan. The plan to close ticket offices en-masse was drawn up well over a year ago. Seizing on the collapse of fare revenue during the pandemic, when the government bailed out train companies with billions in cash, the Conservative government of Boris Johnson, in alliance with the train companies, unveiled plans to axe thousands of jobs, slash wages and gut conditions, safety and pensions.

After years of declining wages and brutal exploitation, this sparked industrial action by rail guards, drivers and network maintenance workers last summer, spearheading a broader strike wave involving hundreds of thousands of workers in key sectors including postal, telecoms, education and health.

At every stage the government and corporations have relied on the unions to sabotage and betray each of these struggles, with a key role played by the rail

unions, above all the RMT.

Throughout 2021, the rail unions participated in the Johnson government's Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG), formed to oversee the Great British Railways re-privatisation plan. The RMT signed the RIRG's Enabling Framework Agreement in June 2021, pledging to "specifically address the workforce reforms and staff cost challenges the rail industry is facing".

Having been forced to call strike action, the RMT, while making noises about job losses at ticket offices and through the elimination or downgrading of train guards, confined action to the issue of pay and, as much as possible, kept its sporadic strikes separate from those of the train drivers' union ASLEF.

Throughout 2023, the RMT has sought to force through a sell-out of the rail strikes and already agreed a rotten sell out in March covering its 20,000 members working for the Network Rail infrastructure company. It wants to do the same to its 20,000 members striking the train operating companies by finalising a two-stage deal with the RDG. However, the government is demanding that the union calls off all strikes and ends the dispute before it will sign off on the agreement.

This has handed the initiative to the government and the rail companies, despite the willingness of rail workers to take them on. The *Financial Times* reported in January that the "Great British Railways Transition Team [GBRTT] and private sector body Rail Partner" had "drawn up a series of more market-orientated reforms." With several rail companies running a service so awful they had to be taken under government control, the new proposals "include moving to contracts that 'restore commercial incentives for operators,'" the FT reported. "The document suggests that the industry believes the 2021 reforms went too far, and that the private sector needs greater freedoms as the railway battles to fix its finances."

In February, new Transport Secretary Mark Harper confirmed the government would back reforms to "enhance the role of the private sector."

That the government is so far down the road in enforcing everything it wants in de-staffing the rail network and slashing labour costs to maximise profit is a devastating indictment of RMT leader Mick Lynch.

Britain's pseudo-left groups declared his occasional statements supporting a general strike and launching of a fraudulent mass campaign against austerity, "Enough

is Enough", to be a rebirth of militant trade unionism. They ignored his actual efforts to neuter the rail strike and impose a rotten agreement, and his insistence that the eventual election of Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party was "the only alternative" to the continuation of Tory rule. The RMT has called just a few days of industrial action since December, to be followed with only three days of strikes over a period of ten days on July 20, 22 and 29.

No industrial action has been called against the ticket office closures. Instead, the RMT is calling two "days of action"—protests to be held outside rail stations on July 13 and 18. The RMT's campaign centres on collaboration with the consultative process, with the public urged to write to their local rail firm with complaints, and appeals made to MPs and councillors of all parties to fight the proposals.

This is the RMT's stock-in-trade alternative to the class struggle. Last March the RMT launched its "Save P&O" campaign after DP World sacked over 800 ferry workers, urging workers to appeal to the Tories to protect a "national asset" instead of organising strikes.

It did the same thing on the rail. Last November, its propaganda opposing ticket office closures stressed that "Over 75% of Conservative MPs have one or more ticket office in their constituency which is at risk of closure." In 2015, an identical campaign on the London Underground ended with the closure of every single ticket office, leaving many stations unmanned and leading to redundancy for around 1,000 station staff and control room assistants.

The fight against ticket office closures and the fate of the rail strikes depends on workers taking the dispute out of the hands of RMT, ASLEF and TSSA bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees must be set up in every workplace to unite all rail workers in a common struggle and to prepare a long overdue counter-offensive against this hated government.



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