

Rail strikes resume as government proceeds with mass closure of ticketing offices

Tony Robson, Laura Tiernan
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Around 20,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union are taking further strike action at 14 train operating companies (TOCs) on July 20, 22 and 29 against a pay freeze and brutal restructuring in the longest running dispute among the past year's wave of strikes.

Rail workers voted by a massive 91 percent to strike, the third such result since the dispute began in June last year.

This week's stoppages come a fortnight after a government backed announcement by the employers' Rail Delivery Group (RDG) that it will close the majority of 1,007 station ticket offices across England. The RMT has supported a toothless three-week public consultation exercise ending on July 26. But the closure program is earmarked for completion over the next three years and is already in full swing.

Appearing on Sky's *Sophy Ridge on Sunday*, RMT leader Mick Lynch said, "This has never been about pay, as we have said consistently. It's about cutbacks, de-staffing and ensuring that the private sector operators maintain their profits." He confirmed 2,300 notices of job losses had been issued, with nearly a quarter of station staff being made redundant.

Lynch's claim that the RMT has fought against de-staffing and cutbacks is empty bluster. It conceals the RMT National Executive Committee's role in agreeing to help the RDG enforce sweeping cuts as part of the Tory government's Great British Railways re-privatisation project.

In January, the RMT signed a proposed Dispute Resolution Agreement (DRA) based on a "best and final offer" from the RDG. This set out a Stage 1 meagre 5 percent pay increase for 2022, and a Stage 2 settlement of just 4 percent in 2023 based on accepting "Workforce Changes". The DRA outlined plans for the mass closure of ticketing offices and other attacks on station staff and On-Board Train Crew, including inferior terms and conditions for new entrants.

Lynch and the RMT have publicly opposed the closure of ticketing offices, but the DRA stated, "*Whilst the RMT does not support TOCs proposals to conduct statutory public*

consultation on the closure or re-purposing of ticket offices the RMT acknowledges that the TOCs have the authority to implement such changes to ticket office provision that may arise from that process. Any changes that the TOCs then propose to implement will be subject to complying with their respective collective bargaining arrangements and statutory collective redundancy consultation."

As the World Socialist Web Site reported, this surrender document was universally rejected by the membership after the RMT's NEC brought it back.

In March, the RMT called off strikes by its 20,000 Network Rail members, balloting them on a repackaged deal only 1.1 percent higher than a previous proposal the union had described as a "dreadful offer". While the RMT claimed it had not accepted Network Rail's "modernisation maintenance" program, this was only because it was unilaterally imposed with the loss of 1,900 jobs. The cuts described by RMT leaders as "an accident waiting to happen" were allowed to sail through, with Eddie Dempsey, RMT National Lead for Network Rail, stating lamely, "We may be able to continue to challenge modernising maintenance in the company processes and raising our concerns with the regulator."

At the end of April, the Dispute Resolution Agreement at the TOCs was scuttled after the RDG declared it would not pay the initial 5 percent raise or enter Stage 2 negotiations unless the RMT agreed to terminate the dispute, end all industrial action and not re-ballot members to renew their strike mandate.

In a video to members on April 27, Lynch said the RDG was "reneging and reversing" January's Dispute Procedures document. "It's my strong feeling, and that of your NEC, that this is at the behest of the Tory government because they want to escalate this dispute and they do not want to give to us what was written down in clear terms in that document."

He continued, "They are now saying that we have to go into the second stage negotiations without an industrial action mandate and without the ability to take that action if

those talks break down and they seek to impose upon us those detrimental terms and conditions, which they are offering in return for a very poor pay rise of 4 percent.”

But these were the same “detrimental terms and conditions” and “very poor pay rise” agreed in principle by the RMT executive in January! Having signed the DRA, handing the initiative to the Sunak government, Lynch and the RMT were now incensed that their capitulation was being used by the RDG to impose change unilaterally, leaving the RMT exposed.

On May 2, Lynch sent a letter to members offering contorted, threadbare arguments to try and conceal the shambles they had presided over.

Amid growing unease over the RMT’s backroom negotiations with thousands of RMT members now having copies of the DRA, Lynch stated, “your Union has never claimed that the documents have been altered”. The RDG’s announcement, he insisted, was rather a “change of interpretation of the documents” agreed in January.

Responding to the RDG’s insistence that its demands for ending the dispute were based on earlier undertakings by the RMT, Lynch conceded that the RMT had agreed in the DRA “that no further industrial action or legal challenges... will be pursued”, countering lamely, “but a process is not an agreement on the issues in dispute”.

He continued, “The RMT’s view has always been that what we were considering was a process rather than a resolution or agreement. At best the DRP was a stepping-stone towards an agreement and the termination of industrial action in the dispute not an agreement on the issues themselves.”

According to Lynch, the RMT’s NEC had merely signed up to “a process”, but this did not imply “agreement on the issues themselves”. Unfortunately for Lynch, the title of January’s dispute resolution document was: “PROPOSED DISPUTE RESOLUTION AGREEMENT RMT and PASSENGER TRAIN OPERATORS - WORKFORCE CHANGE”.

The 16-page agreement made clear the *entire purpose* of the dispute resolution process was to impose massive attacks on jobs, terms, conditions and pay.

On April 27, the RMT announced their rejection of the dispute resolution agreement, with Lynch stating that the NEC’s “understanding of the way forward” had been “destroyed”. He revealed that the RDG had just announced a raft of new attacks against the union’s train driver members.

Lynch urged rail workers to deliver a strong “Yes” vote for industrial action in the ballot closing May 4, declaring “the dispute remains alive” and that the RMT and ASLEF were “fighting for a fair pay rise, defending conditions and

job security”.

The 91 percent strike vote was a rejection of the very conditions agreed by the RMT in January. ASLEF train drivers voted by more than 90 percent for strike action in June against a miserly 4 percent pay offer, with any further increase tied to surrendering terms and conditions.

Coordinated action between RMT and ASLEF members has the capacity to stop the government’s Great British Railways blueprint in its tracks. But Lynch and ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan have again ensured that no unified action will be taken. After calling just 11 days of strikes last year, ASLEF is only authorising limited overtime bans from July 17-22. As for the RMT, this week’s action is the first since a one-day stoppage on June 2.

Lynch has used his undeserved reputation as a “left” firebrand to preside over the most ineffectual industrial action in recent history. Workers should reject the eulogising of Lynch promoted by the capitalist media and the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and similar upper middle-class pseudo-left outfits that are part of the labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Workers’ fight against the closure of ticket offices, the tearing up of terms and conditions and decimation of jobs can be won only by taking the dispute out of the hands of the RMT bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees must be established at workplaces, drawing up non-negotiable demands against the profit frenzy and social vandalism being imposed by the RDG and the Sunak government, linking up with postal workers, NHS workers and other sections of the working class.

The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of the major transport companies, the seizure of their ill-gotten fortunes and their conversion to publicly owned utilities under the democratic control of the working class.



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