

UK: Rail workers union leader Mick Lynch announces de facto end of industrial action

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Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) workers union leader Mick Lynch has announced the de facto end of the 18 months-long dispute by rail workers to defend their pay and working conditions.

40,000 RMT members first walked out last June against government plans to cut pay, erode conditions and sack thousands of workers. Since then, rail workers have struck repeatedly, with strikes less frequent since the turn of the year. Only half of the RMT members initially involved remain in dispute as the union's leadership sold out 20,000 members on Network Rail with a rotten below inflation deal in March.

On Thursday, ahead of two days of strike action to be held Saturday August 26 and on September 2, Lynch wrote in a briefing to RMT members employed in Britain's train operating companies (TOCs) that "the Union's National Executive Committee has given further consideration to the dispute and have outlined the following directions and objectives for our negotiators".

These included, "To obtain an undertaking that discussions with RMT within the companies, including formal consultations and negotiations, will be deferred until the outcome and determination from the ticket office closures consultation has been provided by the Government and, in any case, that these discussions will not commence before 1st December 2023." With the RMT's existing six-month mandate ending in November, even if the union called a new ballot prior to that date, it would likely mean any further industrial action was delayed until the end of the year.

Likely putting any further industrial action on the back burner supposedly until next year, the briefing added that the union wanted, "To obtain a commitment that in the interim, ahead of 1st December 2023, each Train Operating Company will provide to the RMT in writing, their full agenda, and details of Workforce Reform proposals for all functions and grades that they are

seeking to apply within their organisations."

To ensure no industrial action could break out as the company is given ample time to work out their "Workforce Reform proposals" (cuts to pay, terms and conditions, with a drive to increase productivity) the briefing added that the union wanted, "To obtain a commitment that the existing collective bargaining structures and processes in each company will be respected and adhered to in full including consultation and negotiation as appropriate to the matters in scope and, if necessary, use of Avoidance of Dispute processes."

In April, the RMT signed up to a Workforce Reforms & Pay Dispute Resolution Process as a major move towards ending the dispute. This "covers the re?structuring of stations, retailing and the creation of a new multi?skilled stations role as well as catering, administration and fleet reorganisations together with specific workforce reforms..."

The process specified that "TOCs and functional council employee representatives" would "plan a series of meetings to engage in meaningful discussions on the detailed workforce reform proposals within an expected three?month timeframe."

The Avoidance of Dispute procedure, hailed by Lynch, is part of an agreement that allows at least three months of delay before any industrial action can be taken. The document states, "On conclusion of the referral process and no agreement where required having been reached, the collective bargaining procedure will be deemed to have been exhausted. On exhaustion of the collective bargaining procedure AOD [Avoidance of Dispute] a new ballot for industrial action may be instigated. Prior to the TOC progressing with the implementation of any specific grade group changes associated with the AOD there will be a further two?weeks to enable a period of reflection by both parties."

No concrete pay percentage demand was to be fought

for, only a vague commitment, “To obtain a 1-year pay proposal for all companies covering the year 2022-2023, with an underpin, backdated to the relevant anniversary dates in 2022.” The only demand in the face of plans to shed thousands of job losses across the rail network was, “To obtain a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies.”

The briefing also made clear that the RMT was moving on, seeking to “obtain a commitment that pay negotiations for the year 2023-2024 [the current dispute is over 2022-23] will commence from 1st December 2023.” In a separate YouTube video, Lynch commented, “it could take some time before the outcomes of the station consultations are known. And we could then address other issues, including the companies and governments agenda, but also your pay for 2023/24 which is also overdue.”

RMT members have held 33 days of industrial action since last summer losing thousands of pounds of income, as there is no standardised strike pay available. Strikers have had to resort to making individual hardship claims to the union. Lynch, who earns £84,000 a year, plus national insurance, tax and pension contributions had the front to complain, “Contact your branch if you need assistance. This is members solidarity money made available to assist strikers. It's not charity.”

These development underscore the warnings made by the WSWS that the RMT's campaign against ticket office closures is only a cover for their betrayal of the dispute. At the beginning of July, a government-backed announcement by the employers' Rail Delivery Group (RDG) endorsed the closure the majority of 1,007 station ticket offices across England, which will result in thousands of job losses over three years. Myriad tasks previously carried out by ticket office staff will be foisted onto onboard train conductors, at the expense of safety on the railways. In response the RMT supported a toothless three-week public consultation exercise initially to end on ending on July 26. Such was the volume of public opposition to the ending of this vital public service—with more than 460,000 people so far writing into the consultation bodies/watchdogs London TravelWatch and Transport Focus—that this was extended to September 1.

In the intervening period, the RMT kept industrial action to the minimum, holding just three days of strikes against the TOCs on July 20, 22 and 29 and the strikes scheduled for August 26 and September 2. The RMT's campaign centres on collaboration with the consultative process, with the public urged to write to their local rail firm and appeal to MPs and councillors of all parties to fight the proposals. The RMT called two “days of

action”—protests to be held outside rail stations on July 13 and 18. In a circular to members, Lynch handed down a three line whip declaring, “Further to my message on Friday 28th July, please note that these are campaign days of action, focused on distributing postcards to passengers and drawing attention to the campaign, *and not any form of industrial action.*”

Based on such a wretched campaign of begging Tory MPs and the RDG to change course, the days of action were sparsely attended, mainly by a few RMT officials and members of various pseudo-left groups.

With the consultation period ending September 1, the culmination of the RMT's bankrupt “Save Our Ticket Offices” campaign is to be an August 31 march from the Department of Transport and holding of a rally outside Downing Street to appeal to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. The RMT said its purpose was to “defeat, dilute and delay these plans.”

Everything is premised on the Tories, who have not backed down faced with strikes by rail and postal workers, nurses and teachers over the last year having a change of heart. The RMT's pathetic statement declares, “If Transport Focus and London Travelwatch do object to ticket office closures, then the decision will go to the Transport Secretary, and at this point there would be a renewed campaign to put the pressure directly on the Transport Secretary Mark Harper to keep ticket offices open.”

Rail workers must take their fight out of the hands of the RMT. The dispute is very close to an outright defeat, as already suffered by well over a million postal workers, nurses and teachers. Rank-and-file committees must be set up in every workplace to unite all rail workers in a common struggle and to prepare a genuine counter-offensive against this hated government.

Contact us on the form below to begin the discussion on the way forward and to set up a rank-and-file committee.



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