

No fight over railway ticket office closures proposed at London RMT union rally

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Around 1,000 people attended a Save Our Ticket Offices rally organised by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union in London Thursday evening. Protestors gathered outside the Department of Transport before marching to Downing Street.

Only a small number of workers took part. Attendance and enthusiasm was limited by the RMT's refusal to mount an industrial struggle over closures threatening 2,300 jobs. It has kept the issue separate from the ongoing dispute over pay, terms and conditions for 20,000 railway staff in England—itsself suspended for the rest of the year after a strike on Saturday—and focussed campaigning on a fraudulent “public consultation” organised by the Conservative government.

Other Save Our Ticket Offices campaign events have also been small affairs. There is huge public backing, but the workers affected are being denied the chance to make a determined stand as a catalyst for that support. Instead, the RMT is issuing appeals to the Conservative government to have sympathy with “the travelling public”.

The impotence of this strategy was made clear by the speeches at the rally. Points about ticket office closures' impact on the accessibility of the railways were made to the almost total exclusion of the threat of redundancy confronting over a thousand workers. There was very little mention of the ongoing RMT and ASLEF train drivers' disputes.

This allowed the three invited Labour Party MPs—shadow railways minister Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, former shadow women and equalities minister Marsha de Cordova and Socialist Campaign Group member Zarah Sultana—plus Jeremy Corbyn to wax lyrical on the importance of the human touch without conflicting in the slightest with party leader Sir Keir

Starmer's open hostility to striking workers.

Corbyn was in his element, declaring the campaign “a bit of a Rubicon in the way our society is run. Are we to be a society where we never actually talk to anybody... where you can't ever talk to somebody. If you close ticket offices and so much else, a very large proportion of the population, not a majority but a large proportion, are simply excluded from society altogether. There is a big digital divide... The only way to close that divide is the human interaction, the human face, the human voice.”

This is the sort of moralistic, kumbaya political pap in which the former Labour leader excels. It avoids the real and pressing question of how a fight can be waged by the working class against its enemies, and who those enemies are.

The Labour Party's official stance on the ticket office closures is that they are being “rushed” and a longer consultation period should be observed. This was the line followed by Dhesi, the only Labour shadow minister on the platform, in a speech so awful that the even the relatively sympathetic audience had begun to heckle over Labour and Starmer's position by the end.

When speakers did finally address the strike, they had to resort to outright lies. Head of the ASLEF train drivers' union Mick Whelan delivered a dozen lines drenched in hypocrisy.

“The fight of the RMT is the fight of every rail worker. The fight of [white collar union] TSSA is the fight of every rail worker. The fight of Unite is the fight of every rail worker. And we've had our summer of solidarity. We've had our winter of solidarity. Today we're looking after the railway. When we've looked after the railway, we will fight with other workers for a better future for everybody. This government has to listen. This government has to change.”

Speeches such as this should be stopped with the demand, “Sorry, but what are you talking about?”

There is no fight of TSSA and Unite members on the railways. They were led to sellout deals by the union bureaucracy: of 9-13 percent over two years for TSSA members and 9.2-14.4 percent over two years for Unite members—with the promise only of no “compulsory” redundancies to 2025.

Not only is the fight of the RMT not the fight of every rail worker, it is not even the fight of every RMT member. In March, the union’s 20,000 Network Rail workers were pushed to accept a sub-inflation 9-14 percent pay deal over two years, involving the loss of 1,900 jobs.

Last December, a separate deal was struck with the Labour-controlled Welsh government concerning members at Transport for Wales, agreeing a 4.5-6.5 percent wage rise with productivity strings.

The month before, members at ScotRail had been withdrawn from action on the basis of a 5 percent pay rise plus a one-off £750 payment, with productivity strings.

If this is “solidarity” and “looking after the railway”, what does division look like? As for fighting with other workers, from Sunday the only national strike action scheduled to take place this year by junior doctors and consultants. After four million days were lost to strike action in the last year, the union bureaucracy has succeeded in grinding most disputes down to defeat.

By the time Whelan appeals to “this” Tory government to “listen”, the lies have collapsed into farce.

Closing the rally, RMT leader Mick Lynch made clear the scale of the assault being waged by the government and the employers, inadvertently exposing the union’s complicity in mounting such a weak response.

He told the crowd, “In the depths of COVID, they came to us and said, ‘We are going to chop up this industry, we are going to chop up your members’ contracts of employment. You won’t get a pay rise for the foreseeable future and all your conditions are now on the altar of cuts’...

“What they are telling us to do in this industrial dispute is to give up everything that we’ve negotiated, everything that our forebears handed to us in terms of terms and conditions, pensions, pay rostering, you

name it. You’ve got to give that up for a poxy 9 percent over four years.”

How has the RMT reacted? In January 2021 it signed up to the Rail Industry Recovery Group—the framework through which these attacks are being planned and implemented. In January this year it signed up to a “Dispute Resolution Agreement” with the employers, setting out “National Principles” for “Workforce Changes”, only formally withdrawing support when employer ultimatums met a furious response in the membership this April.

All the while, the length of strikes begun last summer has shrunk and the gaps between them has grown. The RMT has now signed up to another framework for discussions with the employers, through which strike action is effectively ruled out for the rest of the year, even as Network Rail denies an annual bonus to workers who took part in strike action and Lynch explains “a quarter of our members working on the station” have been made “redundant in the notices they’ve already given to us.”

As the RMT leaders wind down industrial action, they offer the false dawn of a Labour government reminded of its non-existent concern for the working class. “What the Labour Party must learn, and anyone that wants our votes... If you want working people to vote for you in the coming elections you’ve got to deliver an agenda for working people.”

Socialist Equality Party members attended the rally and distributed the statement, “RMT union moves to end all UK industrial action: Fight the betrayal, form rank-and-file committees!” which warns: “Rail workers must confront the reality that the trade unions do not act to defend their interests but as instruments of the corporations that will betray their members at the first opportunity...

“To prevent the defeat of their struggle RMT members must establish their own fighting leadership, acting independently of their enemies in the RMT bureaucracy and the Labour Party, to take on and defeat the employers and the Tory government.”



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