Oppose RMT and ASLEF sell outs: Build rail and Tube workers rank-and-file committees!

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3 October 2023

Strike action by ASLEF train drivers and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union during the Conservative Party conference in Britain this week has been quickly dismantled, with RMT leader Mick Lynch playing the central role.

Rather than the spearhead of the fight demanded by rail workers, both unions are seeking an exit ramp from the 18-month rail dispute on sellout terms. They are preventing a joint fight against the Tory government and its Labour allies.

Thousands of members of ASLEF are taking part in their latest round of strike action, with a stoppage last Saturday and Wednesday October 4, together with overtime bans. The partial action at 16 train operating companies (TOCs) in England brought the network to a virtual standstill. Train drivers have been without a pay rise since 2019.

Less than a day before a planned strike by 3,500 RMT members on London Underground (LU) on October 4 and 6, the executive pulled the action against 600 job losses which would reduce staffing levels by a tenth. This is part of the austerity measures London Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan is imposing on behalf of the Tory government.

The RMT was not preparing for a strike. It was sitting down at the arbitration service ACAS to discuss how to prevent the mandated action. A brief press release stated that following the talks, “RMT has managed to save key jobs, prevent detrimental changes to rosters and secure protection of earnings around grading changes.”

The RMT vetoed four days of strike action on the Underground in July, as did ASLEF and Unite in relation to their two days of action. They all claimed “significant progress” over jobs losses, pension cuts and changes to working practices after attending ACAS talks.

The discussion at ACAS is on the surrender terms of the RMT bureaucracy. Even the window dressing of unified action on the rail and LU has been jettisoned on the one day of the strikes in which they coincided on October 4. The RMT had advertised a march and rally in London under the title of “Solidarity.”

The RMT had sat out its 20,000 members at 14 TOCs from the ASLEF action even though they face a common attack on pay and conditions by the same private operators.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan is not advancing a fight but advising the government and train companies on how to demobilise one. In the ASLEF journal, he stated that in return for a “significant pay increase across the board” the union would facilitate all demands for overhauling terms and conditions though the division of train drivers. His gripe was that the Tory government was standing in the way.

“Uncoupling the carriages as it were, would have given the TOCs, and the government, a face-saving way out. And given us the opportunity to deal, company by company, with any changes and productivity they were looking for.”

This two-stage blueprint for a sellout is shared by the RMT. As the WSWS wrote, it had agreed a Dispute Resolution Agreement in January based on a below inflation pay deal, mass closures of ticket offices as well as inferior terms for new entrants. This surrender document was universally rejected by the membership when the RMT executive brought it back.

Collusion between the RMT and the TOCs is continuing. Lynch said on *RMT Television*, “I am ready to negotiate. I have put forward documentation and proposals to the train operating companies and I know they share them directly with the rail minister Hugh Merriman and the Secretary of State Mark Harper. And it’s up to them to respond in a framework of goodwill so that we can navigate our way through this dispute and get to a period where we have got no strikes on the railway.”

The Tory ministers and the TOCs have taken the

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measure of the rail unions by forcefully reasserting that no pay rise will occur, even at a well below inflation rate, unless the unions accept the full range of attacks contained in the "Workforce Reform Proposals."

The RMT announced that its most recent strike action on September 2 on the national rail would be its last under the existing 90 percent mandate, even though this was two months earlier than its expiry date. Last week the union began sending out papers for a re-ballot for industrial action. In a short video on September 26 to RMT members Lynch listed the requirements of the anti-strike laws. His central message was that the most important achievement since June last year after 33 days of action was that it had "forced the government to get involved". The call for a renewed mandate was based entirely on adding pressure on the government to work in closer partnership with the RMT.

Lynch stated that the 14 train operators had been prevented from "destroying your terms and conditions, pushing through thousands of jobs losses and closing every single ticket office." But this is precisely what rail workers have confronted thanks to the RMT. The first casualties were the 20,000 workers at Network Railthe government run infrastructure company—in March.

The RMT pushed through a below inflation 9 percent two year pay deal to end their joint action with those working for the TOC's, allowing the destruction of thousands of maintenance jobs. The demobilising of signalling and track staff enabled the scorched earth policy against the ticket offices to proceed. The RMT has abandoned 2,300 ticket office staff, shutting down strike action and diverting popular opposition against the closure of almost all rail ticket offices which gathered 680,000 signatures.

The aims of the ASLEF and RMT bureaucracy are twofold 1) To wear down militant resistance to accommodate the Tory government and 2) to corral workers behind Sir Kier Starmer's right-wing, pro-business Labour Party.

Lynch and Whelan's overriding concern is to secure the positions of the union bureaucracy under the structures of the newly created Great British Railway project of the Tory government and the Rail Delivery Group (RDG). RMT and ASLEF press statements are pathetic appeals for the employers and ministers to meet with them.

The TOCs are issuing redundancy notices while Lynch has instructed members to await the outcome of the watchdogs' report on proposed ticket office closures at the end of this month, or a future appeal to Transport secretary Mark Harper. Last month he publicly described this consultation as a "sham." This sums up the RMT's "Save Our Ticket Offices" campaign, which is built around the consultation process.

As part of this side show the RMT provided a platform for Sadiq Khan to pose as an opponent of rail ticket office closures. During Khan's election campaign for Mayor of London, he promised a moratorium on former Conservative Party Mayor Boris Johnson's closure of all 264 London Underground ticket offices. As soon as he took office, the pledge was dropped and the ticket offices remained closed. Khan is now imposing billions in cuts to London Transport budget in collusion with the Tory government.

The "Enough is Enough" campaign Lynch led alongside Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) has not been a rebirth of the unions but has led to an escalation of union sellouts and attempts to present Labour's election as the only option for workers. Starmer heads a party of ultra-Blairites whose only commitment is to continued austerity, low taxes for the rich and nothing for essential services while backing to the hilt NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine.

Rank-and-file committees are being formed by workers globally as they combat the treachery of the union bureaucracy, including by Royal Mail workers—who began the strike wave with rail workers last year—in opposition to the CWU's sellout and its surrender agreement based on brutal restructuring. Rail workers must now form their own committee, united in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and- File Committees, in opposition to their enemies in the RMT bureaucracy and the Labour Party, to take on and defeat the train companies and Tory government.

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