

# Upcoming UK rail drivers' strike poses combined struggle against train operating companies, Tory government and ASLEF union bureaucracy

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Thousands of train drivers are set to strike 14 of Britain's rail companies in a pay dispute that has entered its third calendar year.

Train services will be hit that affect millions of passengers by strikes from Tuesday January 30 to Monday February 5. Among the companies involved are inter-city operators Avanti West Coast, CrossCountry, East Midlands Railway, Great Western Railway, LNER and TransPennine Express.

To coincide with the walkouts the drivers, members of the ASLEF union, will operate a nine-day ban on overtime from January 29 to February 6. On its own, this will see the cancellations of thousands of services. ASLEF noted that no train operator “employs enough drivers to provide the service they promise passengers and businesses they will deliver without asking drivers to work their days off”.

Having gone without a pay rise for almost five years, under conditions in which inflation was in double figures for much of 2022 and 2023 and is still at 5.2 percent RPI, they were offered a pay deal of just 4 percent in April last year. Even this pittance is to be tied to changes in terms and conditions.

Next week's strikes follow industrial action by drivers against 16 train operators in England from December 1-8, with an overtime ban implemented from December 1-9. However, that strike represented a de-escalation of the struggle by ASLEF even compared with the 14 one-day stoppages across the network strung out since July 2022 when industrial action by rail and postal workers sparked a yearlong strike wave in Britain. Last month's strikes against the rail firms were held on separate days on a piecemeal basis, preventing unified action.

ASLEF stated at the time, “We have, in the past, called everyone out on the same day: by spreading the strike action, for which members voted overwhelmingly, coupled with our ban on overtime across the week, the ramifications for the

rail industry will be greater.”

The union is seeking only a slightly higher pay deal and to have the attacks on terms and conditions “uncoupled” from any deal, in order that they can be agreed and implemented through the union bureaucracy. This was described by General Secretary Mick Whelan as allowing “uncoupling the carriages” and giving the train operators and government “a way out” to end all industrial action.

The latest strikes are similarly broken up on a regional basis.

The action would have been more power, but for two critical factors. Firstly, on January 19 ASLEF cancelled a further five days of industrial action set to be held at LNER from Monday 5 until Friday 9 February. ASLEF called those additional days after LNER—now owned by the government due to yet another private sector failure to run an adequate rail service—declared they would be the first employer in the UK to deploy anti-strike laws legislated by the Tories last June. The Minimum Service Levels (MSLs) law allow the transport secretary to stipulate minimum services on rail network strike days amounting to 40 percent of the normal service. LNER said they planned to invoke the laws to break a one-day walkout scheduled for February 2.

The draconian laws give companies the ability to issue notices to named workers who must work during industrial action, and if they refuse allow firms to fire them. Unions face massive fines if they do not cooperate.

On January 22, ASLEF called off the additional five day strike after management backed down on the threat to use MSL measures. LNER is one of the busiest rail companies, with services running hundreds of miles linking London to Edinburgh.

The Department of Transport had called on companies to take advantage of the MSL legislation to set a precedent and render ineffective industrial action by a key section of the

working class. It urged, “The Minimum Service Levels legislation is available for train operating companies (TOCs) to use, and the government has made it clear train operators should be ready to use them to reduce the impact of rail strikes on passengers.”

The *Financial Times* noted, “TransPennineExpress, Northern and Southeastern, had indicated to the union that they were considering using the powers, but have decided against it, according to the industry source.” It added, “Some senior managers... were privately lukewarm about the wisdom of the legislation.”

That no rail company plans to use the legislation at this stage indicates that they do not want to inflame rank-and-file opposition and also believe that the attacks on pay and terms they want can be implemented—as they have been for decades—in alliance with the union bureaucracy.

Cancelling the action, Whelan demanded it be the occasion for industrial action to be ended outright on the basis of a “realistic” offer the union would try to sell to its membership. He declared, “We have given LNER management—and their government counterparts who hold the purse strings—every opportunity to come to the table and they have so far made no realistic offer to our members. We have not heard from the Transport Secretary since December 2022, or from the train operating companies since April 2023. It's time for them to come to the table and work with us to resolve this dispute so we can all move forward and get our railway back on track.”

Confirming the refusal of the union bureaucracy to confront the anti-strike laws, the Trades Union Congress called a solitary protest but no industrial action against them as they went through parliament last year.

The governments hardline that the drivers accept its rock bottom offer is buttressed by last month's sellout of the other major rail dispute—involving first 40,000 and then 20,000 workers—by the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT). For the 20,000 TOC workers, this included for 2022/23 a well below inflation pay deal of just 5 percent or £1,750, after RMT members had not received a pay increase for two years. The deal was put to workers who had already lost thousands of pounds from their pay packets due to lost wages—with no strike pay only hardship payments over the previous 18 months—to coincide with Christmas. It included with a back-pay lump sum of around 20 months used to bump up the Rail Delivery Group's miserly offer.

With RMT members voting to accept the deal, understanding that its leadership around the nominally “left” Mick Lynch had surrendered to the government, it left ASLEF drivers to fight alone.

As the strikes were announced a government representative said, “ASLEF is now the only rail union that

is continuing to strike while refusing to put a fair and reasonable offer to its members... The ASLEF leadership should do the right thing and let their members decide their own future, instead of deciding it for them.”

Drivers are not just up against rail companies seeking to increase their profit margins at workers' expense, but against the state and its parliamentary parties. This includes the Labour Party, whose leader Sir Keir Starmer opposed the industrial action by millions of workers during the strike wave and even banned his shadow cabinet from attending picket lines.

Starmer's pro-business agenda chimes with that of sections of big business who see the Tories' only enflaming the social crisis by seeking to push through anti-strike legislation. In near identical speeches to the Trades Union and Congress and Confederation of British Industry over the last year, Starmer has called for an alliance between government, business and the unions if Labour wins a general election as expected later this year. At the TUC event he declared, “I'm not just pro-business, I want to partner with business to drive Britain forward... And I will say the same about trade unions to the CBI [Confederation of British Industry].”

In government, Labour would “set up a new Industrial Strategy Council”, delivering “a real partnership between Government, business and unions. This is how we can give Britain the stability it needs for higher investment.”

It is only as part of this corporatist agenda that Starmer has pledged to repeal the Minimum Service Levels legislation and other measures brought in by the Tories since 2016 aimed at restricting successful strike ballots. But there is no guarantee he will do any such thing once in office.

Train drivers must take the initiative and break through the isolation of the strike by ASLEF, the RMT and their support for a Starmer government. This requires the organisation of a rank-and-file rebellion against the pro-company union bureaucracy and the formation of independent action committees.



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