

Success of UK rail drivers struggle means challenging ASLEF's betrayal with fight for rank-and-file committees

Robert Stevens
6 May 2024

Thousands of train drivers are set to strike England's rail companies between Tuesday and Thursday in a pay and conditions dispute now 22 months old.

This is officially the longest rail dispute in British history.

The action called by the ASLEF trade union will hit services used by millions, including some cross-border services to Wales and Scotland, and involves drivers at 16 train companies. Services will be further hit by an overtime ban in place between May 6-11.

But once again ASLEF has ensured that the action will not be a joint offensive, with drivers striking different rail firms on separate days, and only for 24 hours maximum. On day one, nine companies will be hit, six companies on day two and three on day three.

Having gone without a pay rise for almost five years, with inflation in double figures for much of 2022 and 2023 and still at 5.2 percent RPI, drivers were offered measly 4 percent pay rises for two years in a row in April last year. This was tied to changes in terms and conditions.

Strikes first began in July 2022 and have been held sporadically ever since, with the last action in the first two weeks of April this year.

The strikes testify to the determination of the drivers to oppose the erosion of their pay and conditions. But after almost two years, they also demonstrate the abject failure of ASLEF's leadership. The ASLEF bureaucracy, under General Secretary Mick Whelan, have led members into a dead end, with not a single concession extracted from the rail companies and the Conservative government.

The train drivers' dispute is the one remaining

private sector strike ongoing from the 2022-23 strike wave which involved 2 million workers. The only dispute remaining in the public sector is that of 50,000 junior doctors, also at an impasse with the government refusing to make concessions.

Drivers and junior doctors are fighting alone because every single other strike by every other union was betrayed, no matter whether the union leadership was nominally on the "left" or the "right".

ASLEF could have won a timely victory and secured drivers' demands had a joint struggle been waged with their fellow rail workers in the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), as part of an overall offensive for a general strike aimed at bringing down the Tory government.

This was opposed by every section of the bureaucracy, with the RMT led by Mick Lynch signing a sellout below inflation deal for its 20,000 Network Rail members, setting the stage for thousands of job losses, as early as March 2023. Its other 20,000 members striking the train operating companies were betrayed in a below inflation deal last November.

In his own desperate pursuit of a deal, Whelan is claiming that the government-backed Rail Delivery Group (RDG) is ready to do a deal. The *Guardian* reported this week that the RDG, "representing train operators, emailed Aslef late last week to suggest discussions about a framework for formal talks, which the union said it welcomed." Whelan told the *Financial Times*, "Hopefully it will get round the table at some point. We are willing to go to the table [and] still want to have that engagement."

The RDG has not even engaged in talks with the union since April 2023.

The ASLEF leadership's backstop in trying to pull the wool over its members eyes is that the election of a Labour government will answer all their problems.

To a greater extent than ever, the union's social media functions mainly as a bulletin board for Sir Keir Starmer's right-wing party. ASLEF is backing what Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves proclaimed would be "the most pro-business government this country has ever seen", by touting as a return to nationalisation Labour's "Great British Railways" plan, which directly originates in Conservative government policy, leaves much of the industry in private hands, and will sit strictly within Reeves' pledge to impose Thatcherite iron fiscal discipline.

The team of industry professionals Labour propose to run GBR will involve the Conservatives' own GBR Transition Team, as well as the RDG, made up of multi-millionaire executives from all the rail companies. Labour states that one of its models is the Swiss rail system, which had achieved "both significant passenger growth and increased workforce productivity."

Last week ASLEF's X account posted a message on the day of the local elections, reading, "Good luck to every ASLEF member standing for Labour in today's local elections." Another message re-posted was from the Labour Union X account stated, "Every single Labour Mayor backs Labour's New Deal for Working People. Now let's hit the doorsteps this weekend and get them elected!"

This was posted on April 27, yet just five days later, in a leak to the *Financial Times*, specifically chosen as it was International Workers Day (May 1), Labour revealed that even its timid set of proposals on workers' rights had been heavily watered down as a service to big business.

The FT noted that since 2021, "behind the scenes, shadow ministers have been discussing how to tone down some of the pledges to ease employer misgivings as the party tries to boost its pro-business credentials, the people familiar with the matter said... One business leader said that after several meetings with the party, they were now 'pretty relaxed' about its plans."

Nothing can be fought for under the leadership of the ASLEF bureaucracy and its counterparts, who all function as an arm of management. Seeking to conceal this, the central lesson of last years' strike wave are Britain's pseudo-left tendencies. Whatever minor

criticisms they make, all are opposed to anything that challenges the domination of the privileged union bureaucracy of which they comprise a significant layer at national, regional and local level.

On ASLEF's April strikes, the *Socialist Worker*, newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party, admitted that the refusal of the employers and government to do a deal, "shows the [Aslef] strike strategy isn't working." But all they propose is that Aslef's leadership need to try a little harder. "Aslef has called 14 one-day strikes since the first strike ballots went out in June 2022. Had union leaders called an unlimited strike there would have been a settlement well before 14 days had passed." It advised the bureaucracy, "the fragmented and on-off strikes don't move the Tories at all" and "have to escalate."

What is required after 22 months is not more appeals to Whelan and company, but that drivers urgently look to the formation of rank-and-file committees, acting independently and in opposition to the ASLEF leadership. These committees must campaign for unified action with conductors and other grades in the RMT and TSSA, and turn out to workers in other sectors and with rail workers internationally to discuss solidarity action, defiance of Tory anti-strike laws and a coordinated fightback.

To discuss this urgent task, contact the Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees by filling out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact