

Rail drivers in England should reject ASLEF's Labour-backed sellout deal

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Rail drivers in England should reject the sellout pay deal agreed by the train drivers' union Aslef with train operating companies (TOCs), through the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), which has been backed by the Labour government.

The deal is intended as a final betrayal of more than two years of strikes throughout the rail industry.

With drivers receiving a little more than 14 percent over three years (less than 5 percent a year), ASLEF, the rail firms and Sir Keir Starmer's government plan to end rail strikes that began in June 2022, which, along with a dispute involving other rail workers in the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, began an 18-month strike wave in Britain. The train drivers took 18 days of strike action.

The deal was finalised Wednesday in talks at the Department for Transport (DfT), negotiated by ASLEF's General Secretary Mick Whelan and other union executive bureaucrats.

The train drivers dispute is one of just two national disputes, both under threat of a sellout, which are all that remains from the strike wave. The British Medical Association's Junior Doctors Committee has recommended its 40,000 junior doctor members accept a 22 percent pay deal spread over two years—well below the 35 percent pay settlement wanted by the doctors to reverse 15 years of pay stagnation.

Train drivers have been offered just 5 percent for 2022-23; 4.75 percent for 2023-24; and 4.5 percent for 2024-25. This is nearly 10 percent below inflation, with the RPI inflation rate for the first two years at a collective 19 percent and inflation projected at around 3.5 percent for 2024-5. Last month, RPI rose to 3.6 percent, up from 2.9 percent in June.

Drivers had already lost, during the dispute, an average of nearly £4,900 by January as they received no strike pay during their walkouts.

Whelan presents the deal as a pay increase that also protects drivers' terms and condition, calling it a "clean offer, without a land grab for our terms and conditions that the companies, and previous [Conservative] government, tried to take in April last year."

Last year ASLEF rejected an 8 percent offer over two years because it was tied to changes in terms and conditions. Speaking to the *Guardian* in January, Whelan claimed he never opened an email from the RDG the previous month containing a proposed deal, as according to leaks to newspapers, the 8 percent rise was linked to acceptance of changed working practices. Whelan made the telling comment, "We've got a building full of resolutions from the branches, 'Don't you dare ever sign anything like that, we'll cut your throat,' basically."

Whelan's claim to have averted a "land grab" on working conditions is bogus. The plan is that these will be negotiated away once the dispute is over as part of the Great British Railways agenda of the Labour government. This is a continuation of the Tory government's plans for a massive downgrading of drivers' terms.

As far back as September 15, 2023, Whelan stated, "[T]here are 16 companies involved in this dispute and drivers' terms and conditions are different at each of those companies. In fact, at one company, there are, because of amalgamations over the years, three different sets of t&cs!"

Therefore, "Uncoupling the carriages... 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."

Last November, the RMT, under nominally "left" leader Mick Lynch, ended the strikes by tens of thousands of its members—including thousands of conductors—on a similar basis, accepting a below-inflation deal and agreeing that changes to conditions could be negotiated

once industrial action was over, with pay increases thereafter tied to workplace reform.

The sweeping attacks on rail workers conditions which the Tories wanted to impose in one fell swoop provoked mass unrest and strikes. Labour intends to work with ASLEF and the RMT to impose them in a more piecemeal fashion.

In a Department of Transport statement, “Major breakthrough in rail dispute could signal end of national strikes”, the government noted that strikes had already cost the rail industry “around £850 million—a debilitating amount for the industry...” and with the “additional impacts of strikes, including those due to people being unable to work... the total impact likely exceeds £1 billion.”

Transport Secretary Louise Haigh declared the deal “marks a significant step towards resetting industrial relations and resolving the long-running rail dispute, which has seen services disrupted for over 2 years now. As the pay proposal includes an offer for the year ahead, it also means there is no national rail dispute on the horizon.”

She added, “If accepted, this offer would finally bring an end to this long-running dispute and allow us to move forward by driving up performance for passengers with the biggest overhaul to our railways in a generation.”

Settling the rail disputes now is essential so that the reactionary agenda outlined in the Tory-government commissioned National Audit Report (NAO), published in March, “Rail reform: the rail transformation programme” can be actioned. This included far reaching attacks through restructuring and cost savings contained in the Great British Railways plan.

Labour’s election manifesto promised to enact Great British Railways, on which the WSWS commented in May, “As a result of the rail unions’ collusion with the Rail Delivery Group and the Great British Railways Transition Team, the government has already achieved £2 billion in rail reform savings since 2022, according to the National Audit Office—but this falls short of the £2.6 billion earmarked for completion by 2024-25.”

The NAO report noted that the “majority of these savings would come through workforce reform,” before warning that the “DfT told us that it recognised that achieving workforce reforms was particularly high risk as they would be subject to negotiations with trade unions.”

The return of the trade unions to the “negotiation table” under Labour will see them collude in the imposition of whatever attacks are demanded of them by their fellow

bureaucrats in parliament; attacks which the Tory government was unable to impose. In repeated statements, including to the Trades Union Congress, Starmer pledged a corporatist agenda under which he would rule based on “a real partnership between Government, business and unions.”

Lynch and Whelan were among the most enthusiast backers of Starmer with Lynch, once the strike wave was betrayed, offering up a truly cynical endorsement of Labour. On the eve of the general election, he insisted, “the only government we’re going to get as an alternative will be led by Keir Starmer, so people have to deal with that, people have got to grow up a bit in some senses.” ASLEF, as one of the 11 Labour-affiliated unions, played a key role in signing off on its right-wing election manifesto.

The rotten deal signed off by the RMT, and ASLEF’s, if accepted, will serve as a down payment on massive restructuring to come to enact the “reform”—a word used around 200 times in the NAO’s 48-page report—demanded by the rail corporations to boost profits. It states that Great British Railways requires “workforce and pensions reform” as necessary to “making the rail sector financially and operationally sustainable”, and “to creating a more efficient and modernised rail industry.” This requires “Improving driver availability and productivity” and “Modernising industry and station ways of working.”

Drivers and other rail workers must draw the lessons of the struggle they have waged by not only rejecting ASLEF and the RMT’s sellouts, but turning to the building of rank-and-file committees as fighting organisations—operating independently of the unions—and putting their class interests ahead of those of the corporations and Labour government. In this fight the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will offer every assistance. Contact us today using the form below.



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