

Unions end dispute with Royal Fleet Auxiliary to protect UK Mideast operations

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Eddie Dempsey, assistant general secretary of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers union (RMT), spoke at a Gaza protest at London's Whitehall on January 18 posing as a friend of the Palestinians.

But 10 days earlier, the RMT officially ended strikes by its seafarer members at Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) that could have prevented RFA supply ships leaving ports, potentially halting British naval operations in support of Israel's genocide in Gaza.

The RMT has 500 RFA seafarer members. Civilians employed on ships by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), they provide logistical support to the Royal Navy. Unlike military service members, they have the right to strike but can only do so when RFA ships are in port.

Without the RFA's 13 support vessels, the Royal Navy cannot conduct missions.

The RMT balloted its members on a pay deal reached at the end of last year with the Ministry of Defence (MoD). RMT officials described the deal as a win, providing "significant" breakthroughs in pay and working conditions.

Ballot results were announced on January 8, with members voting 83.43 percent in favour and 15.71 percent against. An ex-RFA seafarer commented on *Navy Outlook* "this isn't a massive win. It was the bare minimum... It is a smoke screen that doesn't address the massive losses on pay over the last ten years or the massive increase in workload." He stated: "The union's rolled over".

Nautilus International union members (deck, engineer, electro-technical and logistics officers) also voted to accept the deal. Their action last year—five strike days, and more than a hundred days of industrial action short of a strike—was a first.

While RMT officials have been tight-lipped about the deal's content, *Navy Outlook* reports that it includes a 6.5 percent pay increase for 2023-24, and two additional payments consolidated into base pay: £750 from November 1, 2024 and £750 on February 1, 2025. While RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch (annual salary package £127,000 plus perks) described the deal as "a fantastic result", it barely makes a dent on the 30 percent decline in wages for seafarers since 2010. This was the issue that provoked the strike.

The other issue was workloads. RFA sailors have declined in number, and many RFA vessels are now operating a Tailored Scheme of Complement (TSOC), the minimum level of crew possible to run the ship safely, which can mean being 20-30

percent short-handed according to *Navy Outlook*.

The RMT's agreement with the MoD will see its members offered travel vouchers and commits to reducing tours of duty from 16 weeks to between 10 and 12 weeks. All in all, the deal means RFA members and officers will continue to work long hours on relatively low pay.

The most significant aspect of the dispute was the refusal of the RMT leadership, long promoted as "militants" and "socialists", to take any action to challenge the Gaza genocide. RMT officials used the dispute to deepen their collaboration with the MoD, emphasising the RFA's vital role in British military operations.

Palestinian call for action unheeded

RMT seafarers voted to strike on April 9, 2024, against the imposition of a 4.5 percent below inflation pay offer.

The strikes took place after a call issued by Palestinian trade unions, in October 2023, for solidarity action to block military and industrial supplies to Israel and to halt the genocide in Gaza.

Instead of heeding this call, RMT and Nautilus officials ensured no significant disruption to the Royal Navy's predatory activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. Moreover, Dempsey and Lynch concealed the RFA's role, claiming that RFA vessels were helping the British Navy deliver "humanitarian assistance" to Gaza.

Announcing the ballot result in the January 8 press briefing, Lynch welcomed "a phase of serious discussions with the RFA and MoD on the future structure of the RFA." The RMT spoke about improving recruitment and staff retention so that the RFA could continue to play a "vital role assisting the Royal Navy."

Presented as a "working class hero" by the leadership of the Stop the War Coalition, Lynch explicitly linked the fight by RFA members for improved wages and conditions to the war aims of British imperialism.

Alistair Carns, Labour Minister for Veterans and People at the MoD, thanked union officials for ensuring "the RFA can continue to perform its vital role supporting the Royal Navy and our allies."

The RMT's role in defending British imperialism at sea was underlined in a resolution moved by Nautilus at last September's

Trades Union Congress (TUC) and seconded by the RMT.

It urged the TUC to “exert its influence and pressure the new labour government to urgently address and resolve the RFA pay dispute. A swift resolution is essential to ensure the continued operational effectiveness of the RFA, the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, as well as wider national security.” It was carried unanimously.

Both unions subsequently took their nationalist tub-thumping to the Labour Party conference in September. Nautilus held strikes on September 20-22 to coincide with its opening day, while the RMT organised a lobby. Nautilus’s Martyn Gray appealed to the government: “Since Labour have come to power [in July 2024], they have ended several ongoing public sector disputes, except for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. This is yet another clear message to our members that they are undervalued by government, irrespective of party, despite their critical role in our nation’s national security and defence.”

The RMT has long argued for the critical role of the RFA in national defence. It published a “Royal Fleet Auxiliary Briefing” in January 2024, appealing to the then Conservative government, “The RFA was integral to the UK’s response to neo-fascist aggression in the South Atlantic during the Falklands War in 1982”.

In September 2024, the RMT issued a further briefing pointing to the growing demands on the RFA resulting from expanded military operations: “In addition to their own work, RFA crew carry a significant proportion of the Royal Navy’s work (‘tasking’). In 2018, the RFA carried out 64% of the Royal Navy’s tasking, in addition to performing 100% of their own work. That proportion was 67% in 2023-24 and has risen to 70% in the new financial year.”

Appealing to Starmer’s “party of Nato”, the RMT intimated that if the dispute was not resolved, the “frustration” of RFA seafarers could lead to a resumption of strikes. This would “hamper” the “new [Labour] Government’s defence strategy, which our merchant seafarer members at the RFA will be instrumental in delivering.”

Provocations against Iran

In 2019, during Donald Trump’s first presidency, the US navy deployed to the Strait of Hormuz as part of efforts to strangle Iran’s economy and secure US domination over oil. The Royal Navy joined the US naval build-up.

Mick Cash, then RMT general secretary, wrote to Conservative MP Lieutenant Colonel Tobias Ellwood—the Minister for Defence Veterans, Reserves and Personnel—demanding “an urgent ministerial meeting” to discuss “the worsening situation over pay” for its RFA members. Cash continued, “The current situation in the Strait of Hormuz has the attention of the world, yet the participation of the RFA in replenishing the Royal Navy fleet in the region is largely overlooked, once again.”

The RFA ship *Tidesurge* helped seize an Iranian oil tanker

heading for Syrian ports. Royal Marines dropped onto the oil tanker from a military helicopter launched from *Tidesurge*. *Tidesurge* operates in the North Sea, Norwegian Sea, the Arctic Circle and the Atlantic, including regular involvement in NATO operations. The RMT hailed the role of the RFA in supporting British naval action.

The “humanitarian” ramp off the coast of Gaza

Dempsey has worked to conceal the role of Britain’s RFA and Navy in support of the Gaza genocide. At mass protests in London, he has praised the activity of the RFA’s *Cardigan Bay* supply ship in constructing a so-called “humanitarian” pier off the coast of Gaza.

Navy Lookout described *Cardigan Bay* as being “tasked with supporting the US Amy-led effort to build a temporary floating pier to deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. The ship acted primarily as a floating accommodation base for US personnel. The pier was operational between May-July 2024.”

America’s pier was the brainchild of Democratic Party President “Genocide Joe” Biden, who stated: “I’m directing the US military to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine and temporary shelters...”

The *World Socialist Web Site* exposed this grotesque fraud. The pier is part of plans by US imperialism to place the Gaza Strip under direct colonial subjugation through the ethnic cleansing of its population. Its construction was used by the US to rehearse amphibious landing and logistics capabilities that will be used to implement this fascistic agenda.

Not only do seafarers suffer low wages and back breaking workloads, they also face being sacrificed as cannon fodder in future wars. Seafarers must link their fight on pay and conditions to a struggle against militarism and war. This can only proceed in a direct struggle against the RMT bureaucracy who act as a critical support for the Starmer government’s agenda of war and colonialism.



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