

East Midlands Railway workers to strike over safety concerns connected to the Bedford train crash

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Workers at East Midlands Railway (EMR), operator of the two trains which collided outside Bedford on June 19, are set to take strike action over safety concerns related to faults with one of the models of trains involved. The crash claimed the life of 60-year-old train driver Shaun Burton and injured 162 passengers and crew.

The first round of strike action is set for August 1, with further strikes planned for the following two Saturdays.

Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union members working at EMR, including staff responsible for onboard train operations and passenger safety, have voted for strike action over safety concerns surrounding the Hitachi-built Class 810 fleet.

The Nottingham-to-London Class 810 train came to an unexpected stop near Elstow, south of Bedford, after a safety-system fault. The Corby-to-London train then collided with its rear, killing Shaun Burton and triggering a major operation by emergency services to treat mass injuries at the scene of the disaster.

The Hitachi Rail-built Class 810 trains have been plagued with faults, resulting in a three-year delay before they entered service last December as the intended replacement for the Class 222 fleet. An EMR spokesperson admitted that “ongoing service reliability and maintenance issues on both fleets” had impacted “EMR’s ability to run a reliable Intercity service.”

EMR has axed half of its services between Sheffield and London St Pancras as a result. This is an indictment of the incompetence and negligence of both EMR and Hitachi Rail. Yet the Labour government has allowed the company to act with impunity, slashing the schedule and overcrowding trains while private operator Transport UK, which runs EMR, denies safety concerns over the trains in service.

The BBC obtained an operational briefing issued to

control, signalling and operations staff setting out the procedure for carrying out an Off/On reset on Class 810 trains when certain faults occur. “The process takes approximately 20 minutes and results in the temporary loss of several safety-critical systems, creating an increased risk of an uncontrolled evacuation and removing the driver’s normal means of communication with the signaller,” it states.

Rail workers voting for strike action have taken a decisive step in taking matters into their own hands to avert another Bedford disaster.

In a statement issued on July 21, the RMT said: “EMR has been sending trains into service that are likely to fail and require a full reset, which leaves the train with no active safety systems, including loss of communication between train drivers, dispatchers, and trackside staff. This has occurred at least three times in the last week alone.”

RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey described a situation in which management has acted unilaterally in total disregard of safety: “The company has even put out safety notices with no involvement, consultation or negotiation with our reps, who represent those most at risk.

“RMT is demanding that whilst these faults exist, and until these trains are shown to be operating properly, they should be taken out of service.”

Dempsey did not even mention the Bedford collision. But the RMT press release stated that the union has been “in dispute” with EMR since April “following the roll out 810 fleet which has been operating with a significant number of faults”, which raises whether earlier action could have prevented the crash.

Dempsey added that “RMT reps at EMR had been extremely patient and tried to engage with management to

no avail.”

Nothing will be won on this basis. RMT members must take the initiative by establishing control over how their action is organised, along with oversight of any agreement reached. Their safety, and that of passengers, is non-negotiable. The safety failings should be made public, not treated as confidential business matters. This is vital in winning public support for the industrial action.

This fight requires a joint struggle by rail workers across the network, still at the mercy of private operators whose overriding priority is shareholder profit, and the cuts imposed by the government’s rail infrastructure agency, Network Rail. RMT members at EMR must reach out to their colleagues across the industry.

ASLEF, which represents train drivers at EMR, has not called for coordinated action over the safety concerns surrounding the Class 810 fleet, even though its members operate these trains.

ASLEF General Secretary Dave Calfe stated publicly last month that had the signalling section of line where the Bedford collision occurred been equipped with the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS)—which automatically applies a train’s brakes if it approaches a signal at danger—the disaster could have been prevented. He noted that TPWS has been installed throughout much of Britain’s rail network, adding: “If TPWS had been installed, this accident would not have happened, the driver would not have died, and no passengers would have been injured.”

The Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) preliminary investigation report omitted any mention of this black hole in the rail safety system, instead focusing on the fact that Shaun Burton’s train had passed a red signal. He had attempted to apply the brakes and the issue of whether the trains safety features malfunctioned has not been established.

Yet after pointing out the inexcusable absence of TPWS on a busy section of the InterCity network, Calfe declared British railways were “amongst the safest in the world,” ignoring that Bedford was the fourth serious rail disaster in six years. ASLEF, like the RMT, is leaving everything in the hands of the RAIB—a government-funded agency which “does not apportion blame, establish liability, enforce the law or pursue prosecutions.”

The fight to restore safety on the railways means stripping away the veil of the Labour government’s “Great British Railways,” which the RMT and ASLEF have touted as a return to renationalisation. This was taken over from the Conservative government’s model—a

managed taking back of control from the remaining private train operators by 2029 while the rail system remains fragmented, with freight and rolling stock remaining in the private sector to be plundered for profit.

This was prepared by the government-employer-led offensive through the Rail Industry Recovery Group, established in 2021 to impose £2 billion in cuts through pay restraint, job losses and attacks on working practices, including safety-critical roles. The response of RMT and ASLEF leaders, and all the other unions, was to accept the framework in return for their partnership.

The conditions for the Bedford crash would not have been possible without the demobilisation of the 2022–23 national rail disputes, when 40,000 workers struck against below-inflation pay and attacks on conditions and jobs. This was wound down in return for sub-standard pay settlements, accepting the elimination of 1,950 maintenance jobs at Network Rail, with a major impact on safety. This was so that then-RMT leader Mick Lynch could corral workers behind an incoming Labour government led by the right-wing Keir Starmer.

A collective strike strategy to fight for the restoration of safety must be combined with the demand for an independent workers’ inquiry into the Bedford crash. This is the only way to establish the truth, hold those criminally responsible to account, and fight to reverse decades of privatisation and cuts.

As opposed to the RAIB cover-up, this would be organised by rail workers—train drivers, conductors, signallers, engineers and specialists—for whom rail safety is paramount, not private profit or government austerity. Its remit would be to examine the immediate causes of the collision and also the cumulative impact of privatisation, maintenance cuts, job losses and productivity drives.

Only through the independent mobilisation of rail workers can the truth be uncovered and future tragedies prevented. We encourage rail workers to share and discuss the appeal made by a 35-year rail veteran, Martin, to assist with establishing a workers’ inquiry:

“Mine is a call to all railway colleagues. Bring your expertise to bear, brothers and sisters. Popularise the call for a workers’ inquiry in your depots, sheds and stations. The demand must be ‘No More Shaun Burtons!’”



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