

East Midlands Railway workers strike over safety following Bedford crash

Tony Robson
2 August 2026

East Midlands Railway (EMR) workers walked out Saturday over safety concerns related to the model of one of the trains involved in the Bedford crash on July 19, killing train driver Shaun Burton and leaving 162 people injured.

Train conductors and onboard hospitality staff, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT)—are to take part in further 24-hour stoppages on the next two successive Saturdays over faults with the Hitachi Rail-built Class 810 trains. EMR introduced the Class 810s into service last December after three years of delays due to problems with the new fleet.

The RMT organised pickets at several stations, including Sheffield, Derby, Nottingham and London St Pancras. The stoppage forced EMR to run a skeleton service between Sheffield and Nottingham, with only one train an hour to London St Pancras and services ending at 7p.m.

It was a Class 810 Nottingham-to-London train which came to an unexpected stop south of Bedford on July 19 due to a fault with its Automatic Warning System (AWS) applying the brakes. The Corby-to-London train then collided into its rear, killing its driver Shaun Burton instantly.

Burton had applied the brakes as the train passed a signal at red, but this was not enough to avoid the crash. This has placed a major question mark over the integrity of the signalling system and onboard safety devices on the trains.

What is not in doubt—but is not addressed by the initial report by the official investigation by the Rail Accident Investigation Board (RAIB)—is that this busy section of line carrying intercity services has not been equipped with Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS). This would have prevented the crash.

TPWS uses electronic loops in the track that are linked to the signal. As the train passes over the loops, they

communicate with the train's onboard equipment, which automatically applies the brakes if the train passes a red signal or is approaching too fast.

EMR—run by private operator Transport UK Group—has continued to put Class 810 trains into service, despite problems requiring a 20-minute reset, with the loss of safety-critical systems and communication between the driver and signaller.

The strike action went ahead Saturday after last-minute talks between the RMT and EMR failed. RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey stated, “Despite numerous attempts to resolve the dispute through talks, EMR will not remove the 810s from service. Therefore, the strikes will go ahead, and we remain available for further talks.”

This plea to remain open for talks is at odds with the fight EMR workers confront. The private operator is not negotiating; it is demonstrating its total disregard for safety.

EMR Managing Director Will Rogers has submitted his resignation after stating that the problems with the 810 trains had “fallen below the levels we and our customers expect.”

However, EMR has slashed its timetable cancelling around 20 services a day and is able to act with impunity, denying that passengers' and rail workers' lives are being placed at risk. It is not the industry regulator or the Labour government which has stepped in against the vested profit interests of Transport UK Group, but rail workers through strike action.

The role of the RMT, led by Dempsey, is to contain and isolate the fight. It has not organised all grades in this dispute, including train driver members and station staff. ASLEF, representing most train drivers at EMR, has not organised its members in joint strike action. This will only come by rank-and-file workers organising against the divide-and-rule policy enforced by the union apparatus of both unions.

This can act as a spearhead of a struggle against the private operators still holding the network to ransom and the cost-cutting programme of the government's arms-length rail infrastructure company, Network Rail, which is starving the network of safety improvements such as TPWS.

A WSWs reporting team visited the picket line of RMT members at Sheffield rail station and distributed the articles "East Midlands Railway workers to strike over safety concerns", and "Rail worker calls for independent workers' inquiry into Bedford rail crash that killed driver Shaun Burton."

Workers spoke about how their struggle had been brewing ever since EMR introduced the Class 810 trains last December, their safety concerns and the Bedford crash.

This discussion was cut short by RMT Midlands Regional Officer John Watson, who said that workers could not speak publicly over these issues as it was a disciplinary offence and EMR would claim they are "bringing the company into disrepute". He said only officials employed by the union could make statements.

The WSWs team replied that EMR could not be in any more disrepute: slashing passenger services and playing Russian roulette with safety. They asked Watson why the RMT was not organising a campaign to remove the gagging order but instead ensuring compliance. He replied: "Unfortunately, this is how it's been since the Thatcher years."

This is a cover used for every Labour government, from Blair to Starmer, and now the Burnham government. Workers join unions in the belief there is safety in numbers through collective action and they can discuss and agree a common action to stand up to employers and publicly voice their opposition. Restricting this disables workers' democratic rights to speak on their struggles, appeal to broader sections of workers and society against media smears and generalise their fight against the capitalist profit system at war with workers' jobs, conditions and the provision of critical public services.

Britain, considered the home of trade unions, has been turned into an outlier of workers' rights under a union bureaucracy which accepts such draconian censorship.

The fight to defeat the public silencing of workers engaged in struggle is bound up with workers determining the strategy to fight, deciding how their collective power can most effectively be deployed, demanding the assets they have built up are used to support workers on strike and ensuring their struggles end in victory rather than

managed defeats by the union bureaucracy.

The WSWs team distributed leaflets to Northern Rail workers at Sheffield station at their depot. A long-serving conductor and RMT member said:

"It's ridiculous that EMR are claiming there are no safety problems with their trains."

They shook their head in disbelief that ASLEF had not called its members out at EMR, agreeing this gave traction to the company's denial of safety concerns if drivers were not striking alongside conductors.

"We are meant to be part of the same family of rail workers. We have been discussing at work about the threat of removing conductors at Northern Rail and going to driver only [trains] and the risk to safety if a passenger gets trapped in doors and dragged along and killed. They will calculate how much it will cost in compensation for such incidents against what they can make by doing away with our jobs. It all comes down to profit."

A WSWs team member pointed out that Northern Rail had been brought back under government control, showing that the calculus applied to its cost-cutting agenda.

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, maintenance cuts, job losses and productivity drives.

As opposed to the RAIB cover-up, it 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.

Only through the independent mobilisation of rail workers can the truth be uncovered and future tragedies prevented. The WSWs encourages rail workers to write in with their first-hand accounts of the deteriorating safety conditions they confront. We will ensure anonymity.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact