

East Midlands Railway workers continue strikes over safety faults with Hitachi fleet linked to Bedford crash

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Rail workers at East Midlands Railway (EMR) struck for the second consecutive Saturday on August 8. The dispute began in April over the introduction last December of a new fleet of Hitachi-built Class 810 Aurora trains, which have been plagued by faults.

The dispute was transformed by the fatal collision between two EMR trains near Bedford on June 19, one of which was a malfunctioning 810. The crash killed driver Shaun Burton and injured 162 passengers and crew.

Train conductors responsible for on-board safety have mounted picket lines at EMR stations in Sheffield, Derby, Nottingham and at London St Pancras, demanding the withdrawal of the Class 810 Aurora fleet until it is shown to be safe. EMR management responded with a strikebreaking operation using contingency managers paid £500 a day.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union has another walkout set for August 15, alongside action short of a strike August 9–14 and again from August 16 until further notice.

Members of RMT and ASLEF, the main train drivers' union, had raised serious concerns over the 810 Aurora's reliability months before the crash. EMR, Hitachi, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) regulator and the Labour government refused to respond, keeping the fleet in service.

RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey noted that at least 16 units this month alone had required a full "auxiliary reset". "On top of faulty toilets, broken air con systems and communication and door issues, we are seeing trains stranded on the track and staff are losing confidence in safety levels," he said.

During the fatal crash on June 19, an EMR Nottingham-to-London Class 810 stopped near Elstow after an Automatic Warning System (AWS) fault applied its brakes, leaving it on the Up Fast line. Eleven minutes later, a Corby-to-London train entered the same line, passing a red signal. Its brakes were applied about nine seconds before impact. Although its speed fell from 76 mph to 49 mph, it struck the stationary train.

Burton, 60, the driver of the moving train, was killed, with the provisional cause of death given as injuries to the brainstem and chest. Of the 162 injured, 102 required hospital treatment and 53 remained hospitalised days later, eight critically.

The Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) preliminary report, published June 24, established the immediate crash sequence. However, it left unanswered why this major branch of the rail network, carrying intercity trains, was not equipped with a Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS), which automatically applies a train's brakes when approaching a signal at danger.

ASLEF General Secretary Dave Calfe said the crash would not have happened had TPWS been installed. Yet ASLEF members continue to drive Class 810s through areas without TPWS coverage while being told to await the RAIB's full report.

A fleet with a known history of faults

RAIL magazine's David Stubbings has reported that since the Bedford crash EMR had reduced its timetable, on July 20, as Aurora and Class 222 Meridian reliability continued to decline. The Auroras entered service in December 2025, around three years late.

Stubbings' August 5 report detailed systemic problems: "These [faults] include drivers struggling to hear the Automatic Warning System (AWS), cab door locks jamming, cab door keys snapping, full-service brake coming on when not wanted, faulty bash bars that form part of fire escapes in cabs, difficulty in coupling sets together (with faults transferring from one unit to another), heaters bought from high-street retailers for cabs to keep staff warm in winter months, air conditioning that 'soaks' passengers and persistent toilet problems."

Referring to an incident before the Bedford crash, Stubbings reported: "Meanwhile, on the night of May 25/26, 810013, operating the 2335 London-St Pancras-Nottingham (which started at Kettering 54 minutes late), arrived at its destination at 0529 instead of 0223. RAIL understands faults, including constant brake applications, meant it stopped approximately 12 times during the route."

Stubbings notes: “Analysis of EMR services since the Midland Main Line reopened on June 29, after the Bedford collision nine days earlier, showed ‘810s’ being withdrawn mid-diagram on at least 19 out of 30 days between then and July 28. Two failed to complete their days’ work on seven occasions while one set (810022) had to be withdrawn on three days out of four from July 3–6.”

A striking EMR worker on the picket line in Nottingham last Saturday told the World Socialist Web Site:

These 810s have a fitter in them as standard. If you bought a car from a garage, would you have a mechanic sitting in the back seat for the first nine months of driving? No, you would not. I’ve never known a new train ever have a fitter, maybe over the first couple of days, maybe the first two weeks. Nine months in, they’re still travelling with every single train because the extent of the fault is so significant.

Neither EMR (run by private operator Transport UK), Hitachi, the ORR (which licensed the fleet) nor Network Rail, whose investment decisions left this section of track without TPWS, can be expected to investigate in a way that holds them accountable. The RAIB, funded by the Department for Transport, foregrounds that Burton’s train passed a red signal but does not address the absence of TPWS.

The RAIB states it “does not apportion blame, establish liability, enforce the law or pursue prosecutions.” This leaves unanswered who decided against installing TPWS on the section where the crash occurred, whether cost was weighed against safety, and how many other signals nationally remain without this basic safety provision.

Lessons of the 2022–2023 national rail strikes

These safety violations have been facilitated by the sellout of the 2022–2023 national rail strikes, involving 40,000 workers. Then RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch ended the Network Rail dispute in 2023 on a below-inflation 9 percent settlement, accepting the elimination of 1,950 maintenance jobs. ASLEF’s Mick Whelan accepted a 14 percent deal over three years from the incoming Starmer Labour government in 2024.

Bedford is the fourth major rail disaster in six years, and each has exposed serious safety failures without any minister, rail executive or Network Rail manager facing serious consequences. Central to this was the restructuring overseen by the Rail Industry Recovery Group, established in 2021 to impose £2 billion in cuts through measures including pay

restraint and thousands of job losses in safety-critical positions.

In calling off the strikes, the nominally “left” leaderships of the RMT and ASLEF called on workers to support the incoming Labour government, which has adopted the Conservatives’ Great British Railways project. This will transfer most passenger services back under state control as private contracts expire by 2029, while the government, aided by the union bureaucracy, imposes further cuts and productivity drives.

It leaves intact the fragmentation of the rail system, with freight and rolling stock still in private hands for gauging profits, and companies such as FirstGroup and Arriva running services between London and Hull, Sunderland and Edinburgh under “open access” agreements.

EMR rail workers have stepped in to enforce safety against the regulator and Labour government. But this is a fight that cannot be won through a dispute confined to single operator. The RMT is restricting action to only a section of its members at EMR, while ASLEF is not taking part in the strikes.

This is a safety-critical issue concerning all rail workers and the public: the Class 810s must be removed until fully safety compliant, and nationwide TPWS coverage must be demanded. The initiative can only be taken forward by establishing a rank-and-file network to end the divide-and-rule tactics of the union apparatus.

Unified strike action by rail workers must be combined with the convening of an independent workers’ inquiry into the Bedford crash, conducted by rank-and-file railway workers, supported by engineers, safety specialists and passengers. It must examine not only the AWS fault and absent TPWS but the cumulative impact of privatisation, maintenance cuts and job losses, naming those responsible for decisions the RAIB is statutorily prohibited from pursuing.



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