

Rail workers vote to extend UK national strike action as RMT union holds closed door talks with employers

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union has been delivered a renewed mandate to extend national strike action by 40,000 rail workers at Network Rail and 14 train operating companies, with a 91.7 percent majority on a 70.2 percent turnout.

The RMT announced the results on Wednesday of a re-ballot that began October 18. The mandate for action was larger than the 89 percent returned in the original ballot in May that began a series of one day stoppages starting in June and launched a “summer of discontent” against the Conservative government.

The gulf between a rank-and-file determined to defeat the historic attack on jobs, wages and conditions and the union executive was summed up by RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch. In a press release he stated, “The National Executive Committee will now look at these fantastic results and negotiations will continue with Network Rail and the train operating companies.” He claimed the vote was “a massive endorsement” of the RMT strategy “to win workplace justice through negotiation where possible and industrial action if necessary.”

Rail workers have not voted to renew the strike mandate for their “aspirations” to be relayed to the employers, but to step up their mobilisation to defeat the £2 billion cuts integral to the re-privatisation of the rail network through the Great British Railways scheme.

Since the last national one-day stoppage on October 8, the RMT executive has been working overtime to prevent further strike action as it seeks an accommodation with Network Rail and the train operating companies. Lynch has been engaged in what the RMT described as “intensive negotiations” behind closed doors. This followed the last-minute announcement by the RMT on November 4 to cancel a further round of three days of

national strike action planned for November 5, 7 and 9.

Lynch declared “The threat of strike action and our strongly supported industrial campaign has made the rail employers see sense.” He could not cite a single concession from Network Rail or the train operators over demands for further pay restraint, axing jobs and overturning terms and conditions.

The only stated criteria by the RMT for a negotiated settlement is no compulsory redundancies and evasive references to a decent pay award without an actual demand. This is after rail workers have suffered a three-year wage freeze.

While rail workers remain in the dark over the negotiations, the chief executive of Network Rail, Andrew Haines announced last Thursday at the Rail Industry Association Annual Conference that the elimination of 1,850 maintenance jobs will proceed. Haines stated “The great news is we’ve had well over that in voluntary [redundancy] applications already and expressions of interest. It allows us to potentially find a pay award that will bring current industrial relations to a resolution.”

He added that the local phase of the implementation would begin on December 3 to allow for a negotiated agreement with the RMT, or without its agreement.

The union’s claim to defend “job security” is a fig leaf. This has been whittled down to the downsizing of jobs being conducted via the Voluntary Severance Scheme while claiming that redundancies for 2,000 maintenance workers out of 10,000 should not be to the detriment of terms and working practices.

As Haines indicated any improvement on the derisory offer by Network Rail of 8 percent spread over two years will be in return for the RMT accepting the massive restructuring exercise at the expense of jobs and risk to safety.

The train operating companies who are also in the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) with Network Rail provided a brief update on November 11 on their talks with the RMT. This makes clear that any revised pay offer above their insulting 2 percent is tied to productivity strings:

“We have held a series of constructive discussions with the RMT leadership this week and we have agreed to continue these discussions next week. Our priority remains to reach a fair deal which both rewards our people with a pay rise, and delivers the reforms needed to secure a sustainable future for the industry and those working within it.”

The “sustainable future for the industry” is premised on gutting the railways with the planned closure of 1,000 ticket offices and further removal of guards through the extension of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains beyond the 50 percent of the network already covered.

In the face of calls by rail workers for unified action, the rail unions have doubled down on their utterly divisive approach. TSSA, representing control room, station staff and managerial grades scuttled into talks with the train operators after cancelling strike action at five rail companies on November 5, 7, 8 and November 9. It did the same to facilitate talks with Network Rail after ditching three days of strike action by thousands of its members.

The drivers’ union ASLEF is the only rail union to continue scheduled strike action—a one-day stoppage on November 26 at 13 train operators. This is the fifth day of stoppages since July 30, with the most recent on October 5 the largest in 25 years with 9,000 train drivers taking part. From the outset ASLEF under General Secretary Mick Whelan has ensured the train drivers pay dispute has been kept isolated from the attacks confronting other rail workers.

The message from Lynch and other rail union bureaucrats that there is a deal to be had is based on a pledge to suppress the burgeoning opposition from the working class to austerity and the cost-of-living crisis—including the first-time vote for national strike action by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and the demand for a 5 percent above inflation pay deal.

The Sunak government is being propped up by the union bureaucracy stalling ballots of hundreds of thousands of workers or delaying strike dates after receiving huge mandates. Eight days of strike action by postal workers were cancelled by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) as General Secretary Dave Ward scuttled into ACAS talks with Royal Mail chief Executive

Simon Thompson. Desperate attempts are being made to avert the start of a further round of action.

Transport Secretary Mark Harper has invited the general secretaries of the RMT, TSSA and ASLEF to a meeting “in the near future.” Harper stated in response to the strike vote on Wednesday that this was “disappointing” and called on the RMT to “keep working with employers, not against them”. This is one call that Lynch is desperate to heed.

The establishment of rank-and-file committees would enable rail workers to defeat the sabotage by the union bureaucracy of their struggle, and to secure a pay increase that meets up to the cost-of-living crisis. It would enable workers to demand an end to closed door talks and direct oversight of negotiations opposing all productivity strings tied to mass redundancies and tearing up of terms and conditions. The committees would direct and co-ordinate the strike action of rail workers against the divisions imposed from the top by all the trade unions.

As explained in the statement of the Socialist Equality Party “Rank-and-file must take control of the UK rail strike”: “The same Tory and Labour politicians who claim there is ‘no money’ to provide decent pay, terms and conditions handed £16 billion to the private rail operators during the pandemic, and hundreds of billions more to the corporate and financial elite over the past two and a half years. The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of the major transport companies, the seizure of their profits and their conversion to public ownership under the democratic control of the working class.”



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