

RMT seeks to rein in strike action by Royal Fleet Auxiliary seafarers to aid Labour government's war agenda

Michael Barnes
16 August 2024

The industrial dispute among uniformed civilian seafarers at the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) against historic low levels of pay and exploitative conditions by members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers (RMT) union is exposing the “left” pretensions of its General Secretary, Mick Lynch.

The RMT leader is acting to rein in his members based on support for the Labour government's war agenda.

The RFA workforce is employed by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and consists of around 1,750 civilian seafarers operating a fleet of 13 vessels providing logistical support critical to the Royal Navy's global operations. The concerns expressed in ruling circles over an escalation of the dispute were spelt out back in April in the *Sun* by Lord West, a retired admiral and Labour supporting peer.

“We have used the RFA more and more as the Navy has been squeezed. They are our amphibious strike capability, our refuelling and replenishing capability. If they go on strike completely, then it will have a severe impact on our ability to conduct operations.”

Far from alerting the working class to the advanced war preparations in the Middle East and opposing the escalation of NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, Lynch presents the RFA dispute as purely an issue of pay and terms which Labour will supposedly settle fairly. This is based on a transactional agreement to support war.

The RMT represents 500 members at the RFA from deckhands, engine, communications, catering staff and security staff. The trigger for the dispute was the imposition of a sub-inflation 4.5 percent pay award under the Conservative Sunak government last November. The RMT was thrust into an unwanted dispute after its members voted in April for strike action by a 90 percent majority on a 55 percent turnout. It has only called staggered one day stoppages on docked vessels at ports in the UK and internationally on May 19, June 25 and August 1 with the most recent walkout today. The Nautilus International union representing RFA officers called its first strike action yesterday, after receiving a mandate in April based on a 79 percent majority and 60 percent turnout. Both unions maintain regimented sectoral divisions.

The RMT cites a reduction of pay of 36 percent and depletion of crew sizes by 28 percent while Nautilus reports a 30 percent pay decline for ships officers, which both unions have presided over. The first day of strike action was used by Nautilus to warn the Labour government it was sitting on wider opposition. Union official Helen Kelly explained from the picket line in Portsmouth that within six weeks, “The Royal Navy will find it very difficult to operate at its current levels within conflict zones.”

The gutting of the jobs, pay and working conditions of RFA seafarers is an indictment of the nationalist flag waving during the RMT's lobbying of parliament over many years in its “Pay Justice for the RFA” campaign.

A May 19 RMT leaflet explained the RFA has supported “nearly every military conflict involving the UK in the past 119 years.” It is the unswerving loyalty of the union bureaucracy to British imperialism that has led RFA seafarers to suffer an evisceration of their jobs and working conditions.

False friends of the Palestinians

The most grotesque example of the services rendered by the RMT bureaucracy to British imperialism has been its defence of the task group dispatched at the start of the Gaza genocide by the Sunak government—backed by Labour—to support Israel in its military siege and as part of the US military build-up in the Middle East.

Lynch has been paraded at the mass demonstrations against the Gaza genocide organised by the Stop the War Coalition, while his Stalinist Assistant General Secretary Eddie Dempsey was allowed on their platform to spout the lie that the two RFA vessels dispatched as part of the task group with RMT members on board was to provide “humanitarian assistance.”

The Conservative government's October 13 press release, “Prime Minister deploys UK military to Middle East to support Israel”, was unequivocal: “The military package, which

includes P8 aircraft, surveillance assets, two Royal Navy ships—RFA Lyme Bay and RFA Argus—three Merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines, will be on standby to deliver practical support to Israel and partners in the region, and offer deterrence and assurance.”

On August 1, Lynch spoke at the Connolly Lecture in Belfast, Northern Ireland posing as a friend of the Palestinians.

He rebuked other union leaders who would not “come out on the demos” arguing that they were “on a workers agenda. What they mean is that they’ve got members building the weapons that are being used in Palestine right now.”

Lynch was referring to Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and the leaders of the GMB and Prospect unions, whose members work in the arms factories. Graham had earlier denounced “groups that look to build networks inside trade unions to undermine the defence industry or demand the disbandment of NATO and AUKUS [the Australian, British and US military alliance against China]... We are a trade union with thousands of members employed in the defence industry.”

But Lynch was not proposing a struggle against such positions, only urging unions not to be so naked in their support for genocide and war. RMT leaders are playing just as criminal role at RFA.

Lynch also threw the weight of the RMT behind the election of warmonger in chief, Sir Kier Starmer. Last February Lynch said of workers attacking his position that they have to “grow up a bit.”

Corporatism and war

RMT officials are embedding themselves in the corporatist apparatus being erected by the Labour government alongside the corporations to create a war economy funded through the further gutting of social services, the National Health Service and austerity against millions of workers.

Lynch in a July 11 update to members at RFA members described meeting with the MOD and new Armed Forces Minister Luke Pollard MP, as a breath of fresh air. Pollard was “committed” to working with the RMT to resolve the pay dispute and begin “to recruit more Ratings in re-building the RFA as we enter a period in which Government and the RN (Royal Navy) expect to be even more reliant on the hard work and dedication of the RFA’s merchant seafarers.”

Lynch added, “The Minister also confirmed that the RFA would be included in the Defence Review which he announced yesterday” and the RMT “will be putting together a comprehensive case for reforms that preserve the operational flexibility of the RFA fleet whilst improving fleet readiness.”

Lynch cited a phone call with Secretary of State for Defence John Healey, “who is attending the NATO meeting in

Washington DC and could not attend yesterday’s meeting. The Secretary of State is also keen to resolve the current dispute and is committed to tackling the long-term challenges facing the RFA. We should also see that as a positive signal.”

Labour’s participation in the NATO summit on July 10 was to put the final details in place for the NATO-led invasion of Russia in the Kursk region by the Ukrainian Army, using British tanks, and a vast increase in military support for Israeli genocide in Gaza and wider Middle East war.

The RMT bureaucracy acts as a recruiting sergeant for war. It approaches to RFA issues of pay and working conditions not from the class standpoint of their rights, but to ensure the success of British military operations.

Lynch’s cosy relations with the MOD and Labour government have not led to an offer which can be sold to his members as a concession. An August 15 RMT press release saw Lynch criticise the MOD for adopting a “bunker mentality” and refusing to settle the dispute. The RMT cited the RFA’s website that it is fully integrated into operations around the world including “high-tempo combat”, insisting that this should be reflected in “what they are paid.”

The actions of the RMT leadership are politically criminal in placing their members on the frontline of an escalating imperialist redivision of the globe. While the RMT has advised members of their legal rights to withdraw labour if they believe they are being forced to participate in war crimes this is left up to individuals to face the wrath of the Admiralty, not a collective class stand.

In opposition to the invocations of patriotism and national unity to conceal the class divide, the fight against exploitation and social inequality must be joined with the fight against imperialist war and genocide based on an anti-war movement rooted in the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)