

RMT union General Secretary Mick Lynch: The Labour government's toady-in-chief

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During the 2022-3 strike wave in the UK, Mick Lynch, the general secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) regularly took to the stage of rallies asking the whereabouts of Sir Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour opposition.

Framed as calling out the refusal of Labour to come to the defence of embattled workers under a Conservative government this was an example of the empty rhetoric Lynch specialises in.

The hostility of Starmer and the Labour Party to the strike action against the crippling impact of the worse cost of living crisis in a generation was never in doubt. Starmer had even warned his shadow cabinet members that visiting a picket line would be grounds for expulsion. The role of Lynch and other trade union leaders acting as figureheads for the “Enough is Enough” campaign—such as Dave Ward, general secretary of the Communication Workers Union—was to head off calls for a general strike and corral workers behind the election of a right-wing Labour government.

Once this political roadshow had served its purpose, it was wound down and a raft of sellout deals were rammed through involving real terms pay cuts and brutal restructuring, particularly on the national rail and Royal Mail.

RMT members are entitled to now ask, “Where is Mick Lynch?”

The RMT leader has disappeared into closed door meetings with different departments of the incoming Labour government, just as Starmer has announced his intention to impose more than £20 billion in austerity measures in their upcoming budget while declaring that things will be “painful” for years to come.

Lynch is busy tamping down strike action by around 500 RMT members on the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA), triggered by the imposition of a sub inflation pay award of 4.5 percent last November, while also preventing a resumed national rail strike the RMT only just ended after 18 months on the terms dictated by the Sunak Tory government.

An RMT press release on August 16 stated, “TRANSPORT UNION RMT will enter pay talks with the Department of Transport on behalf of the train operating companies next Tuesday and Network Rail next Thursday as well as talks with the Ministry of Defence [MoD] on behalf Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) members in order to settle long running pay disputes.

“RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said that all offers would be dealt with by the union after talks are completed with Network Rail and the MoD on Thursday.

“We really need to move on from the belligerent and hostile attitude of the last government and reset industrial relations to allow rail workers and RFA seafarers to get on with the job,” he said.

Nearly two weeks later the RMT has not made any additional public statement. No wonder. During the general election campaign, Lynch attacked anyone opposed to Starmer, telling them that people had to “grow up a bit” as Labour was the only alternative.

The RFA dispute: No pay settlement based on Labour's war agenda

Back in April, the RMT, representing deckhands, engine, communications, catering staff and security staff was handed a 90 percent mandate for strike action by its RFA members who were demanding a reversal of 14 years of real term pay cuts of 36 percent and gutting of crew sizes by 28 percent.

The strike action the RMT reluctantly called has been staggered in four separate walkouts, the last on August 16. This was the day after the one-day strike called by Nautilus UK, representing ships officers, after that union sat on a 79 percent mandate also from April.

The strike action threatens to cut across the escalating war drive of the Labour government in its backing for the Gaza genocide and a wider regional war targeting Iran in the Middle East, on top of the proxy NATO war against Russia in the Ukraine.

The RFA workforce is employed by the Ministry of Defence 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.

Lynch has explicitly tied a pay settlement for RMT members to the Labour's governments war agenda, stating that the pay issue will be addressed as part of the government's upcoming

Defence Review—which is aimed at ramping up military spending. The RMT’s supposed “friends of the Palestinians”, such as Lynch have already allowed its members to take part in the military Task Group dispatched by the Sunak government last October to support Israel as part of the US-led military buildup in the region.

Labour’s Great British Railways: A revamped Tory project

In holding talks with the Department of Transport over Network Rail and the private train operators in relation to what Lynch describes as “pay disputes”, the RMT is trying desperately to get ahead of opposition to its negotiated surrender to the Tory government last year.

The Labour government moved immediately to end outstanding strike action in the long running national rail dispute by members of the ASLEF train driver’s union, after two years and 18 days of stoppages. This enabled ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan to broker a marginally improved pay deal with the Labour government from that insisted on by the Tories, but still based on a real-terms pay cut. Whelan boasted that the deal did not contain the productivity strings previously demanded.

This boast is fraudulent and designed to get over the line the sub-inflation deal in the ballot of ASLEF members. No doubt Whelan will agree to the changes to working practices demanded by the 16 train operating companies (TOCs) on a company-by-company basis going forward, as he has already stated.

Nevertheless Whelan and ASLEF did succeed in embarrassing Lynch and the RMT whose rotten deal reached last November to end an 18-months dispute after 33 days of strike action by 20,000 rail workers at the 14 TOCs was worse than that agreed by Whelan.

Lynch endorsed a marginally improved offer of 5 percent for year one—admitting it was below inflation, and negotiations on pay for the second year he accepted would be tied to workplace reforms negotiated separately at each TOC.

He did so by jettisoning a third renewed mandate for strike action in the dispute since it started in June 2022.

This followed the RMT’s earlier sellout deal at Network Rail in March 2023, taking 20,000 signal and maintenance workers out of the dispute based on a below inflation 9 percent pay deal for two years and allowing for thousands of job losses to be imposed.

This left Lynch in the pathetic position of insisting in *The Times* that his members now expected the same terms as those offered to train drivers to end their strike action in a “parallel, synchronised offer”—a demand rendered faintly ridiculous

given that the RMT had already ended all industrial action long before Labour even came to office.

What unites Lynch and Whelan is their efforts to conceal the real content of the Labour government’s Great British Railways (GBR) project led by Labour’s Transport Secretary Louise Haigh, claiming it represents a move back to an integrated rail system under public ownership.

As the WSWS explained, under the plan Labour would not renew the contracts for the remaining 10 TOCs over a 5-year period. Rail services will instead be placed under a new national structure with GBR acting as the “guiding mind” Already, 40 percent of TOCs have failed and been bailed-out by the government under “operator of last resort” measures.

Even this new plan has been handed to a consortium of Arup Group, Ernst & Young and SNC-Lavalin Rail & Transit to run the franchises for the Department for Transport. In addition the rolling stock companies will continue to rake in profits by leasing trains and carriages, and freight rail will remain within the private sector, under contract from GBR.

Labour has in effect borrowed largely from the Tories original plans, whose central aim was spelt out in the National Audit Office (NAO) report published in March which detailed the restructuring and cost cutting involved in the GBR plans.

The rail unions’ partnership with the Rail Delivery Group and Great British Railways Transition Team has already resulted in £2 billion of cuts since 2022 according to the NAO against a target of £2.6 billion by 2024-5. The NAO report noted that the “majority of these savings would come through workplace reform”.

Rail workers and RFA workers must draw the necessary lessons from the filthy manoeuvres and betrayals of Lynch and the RMT.

Together with drivers in ASLEF, they must build rank-and-file committees to wage a joint struggle for decent pay and conditions and against the austerity and war agenda of the Labour government and its partners in the union bureaucracy.



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