

ASLEF blocks train drivers' strike at LNER to fall in line with UK Starmer government

Tony Robson
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The suspension of strike action by train drivers on LNER last Thursday following last-ditch talks held between the ASLEF union and the company has been carried out at the behest of Britain's Labour government.

The fear is that strike action by any section of workers, particularly those within key sectors such as national transport, will ignite broader opposition to Labour's pro-business agenda and "painful" austerity budget cuts to be imposed next month.

Following closed-door talks, ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan announced an agreement to justify vetoing mandated industrial action—calling it off only two days before 450 train drivers were due to walk out for the first of 22 days of strikes over successive weekends between August 31 and November 10.

The strike would have placed LNER train drivers in a struggle directly against the Labour government. The company runs passenger services on the main arterial rail service between London Kings Cross and Edinburgh on the East Coast Mainline and is under the control of the Department of Transport as the "Operator of Last Resort." This followed the bailout in 2018 of the responsible train operating company (TOC)—a joint venture between Stagecoach and Virgin Trains—which abandoned the operation after not achieving its forecasted profits.

This was the third failed private franchise to have operated the East Coast Mainline and one of three TOCs to have withdrawn from the network in the past five years.

Anger among ASLEF members had been brought to boiling point by management bullying and persistent breaking of agreements by the company, including pressuring drivers to work outside rostering agreements and contacting them remotely, and employing managers to fill train drivers' positions—paying them a £500 bonus on strike days during the two-year national dispute and a £175 bonus on normal days.

That ASLEF has presided over this nightmare was blurted out by lead union negotiator at LNER, Nigel Roebuck, who referred to woeful understaffing levels and added that the

"goodwill" he claimed existed among train drivers to compensate for this by working longer hours had "evaporated."

ASLEF is now seeking to fix the breakdown in "industrial relations" by extending its own goodwill to management and the Labour government by calling off the strike and nipping in the bud a long overdue collective fightback.

The union's press release makes no reference to the content of the agreement struck with the company or how it resolves the fundamental grievances of LNER train drivers. They are expected to take at face value the pronouncements of union officials assigning themselves the right to speak in their name.

Whelan's statement on the agreement was the stuff of slippery formulations: "Once again we have demonstrated that by sitting round the table and negotiating, issues on the railway can be resolved in a way that means better workplace practices for rail workers and a better service for the travelling public. ASLEF will continue to campaign for a fully-staffed railway that doesn't rely on excessive use of driver overtime."

The evasive references to a continued "campaign" for a fully-staffed railway, and to not relying on "excessive" overtime expose the fact nothing has been resolved for train drivers. As a first principle, LNER train drivers who collectively stood up and voted for strike action should decide *collectively* whether their demands have been met and only after the document has been shared, read and agreed by those on the front-line.

Whelan and ASLEF's cancellation of the strike follows the announced settlement to end the bitter, two-year national rail dispute by train drivers at 16 TOCs over pay and attacks on terms and conditions. It was urgent the union bureaucracy pull the action, which it has always falsely insisted has nothing to do with the national dispute, so that it did not galvanise opposition to the national sellout deal it has hatched with the Labour government.

That deal is for a sub-inflation 15 percent pay rise over three years covering 2022-5. Train drivers have not received

a pay increase since 2019. The ballot of 13,000 ASLEF members ends on September 16.

In a miserable attempt to justify ASLEF's recommendation of the real-terms pay cut, Whelan has claimed it does not include productivity strings previously demanded by the Sunak Conservative government. The Labour government has cut ASLEF some leeway by not formerly insisting on the changes to working practices but only because both parties know this would lead to its rejection.

However, Labour felt free to do so thank to Whelan's well-documented public assurances that a restructuring of terms and conditions could be discussed once a pay settlement was reached. Last year, he offered the Tories and TOCs what he described as a "face-saving deal" to deliver "any changes and productivity they were looking for."

The LNER deal is a blueprint for Labour's "reset" of industrial relations based on a partnership with the union bureaucracy, and should serve as a warning to all workers.

For its part, the Labour government made no attempt to disguise its hostility to LNER train drivers. Transport Secretary Louise Haigh's strike-bashing was paraded in her letter to the *Daily Mirror* which equated the fight by train drivers to restore their rights with management's trampling all over them: "I've made my frustrations clear to both parties and my message is simple. Follow this Government's lead—urgently get around the table, negotiate in good faith and stop this action before it starts."

After ASLEF bowed to Haigh's decree, she channelled her inner Thatcher in telling the *Guardian*: "For too long our railways have been brought to a standstill by industrial disputes with no end in sight. This is a constructive step forward to fixing our railways and getting the country moving."

References to fixing "Britain's broken railways" and Labour's so-called reform agenda are a fraud based on pro-market doublespeak. The reality is that Starmer's government is proceeding with a revamped version of the Conservative's Great British Railways (GBR) scheme. Whelan and RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch are trying to fool workers into believing this is a step towards returning the national railways to public ownership.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has explained this has nothing to do with a genuine re-nationalisation, as Labour openly acknowledges. The government will only take back control of the 10 remaining rail services run by TOCs once their contracts have expired over the next five-year period. The highly limited measure on the passenger service side will still mean a fragmented rail system with freight and rolling stock remaining within the private sector to be plundered for profit.

GBR, envisaged as the "guiding mind," is dedicated to forcing through cost efficiencies which have already resulted in £2 billion of cuts since 2022, according to the National Audit Office, against a target of £2.6 billion by 2024-5. Its report notes that the "majority of these savings would come through workplace reform."

Playing his part alongside Whelan to pre-empt any re-emergence of workers' struggles on the railways—after the sellout of the of the 18-month dispute waged by 40,000 of its members—RMT leader Lynch is currently in closed-doors talks with the Department of Transport over "pay disputes" with Network Rail and 14 TOCs. A Memorandum of Understanding with the TOCs agreed last November saw the RMT annul a third renewed strike mandate based on a 5 percent pay award for 2022-3, with the second year of the deal tied to changes in working practices and negotiated separately at each TOC. Even now Lynch is asking for no more than what has been offered to ASLEF.

Rail workers must draw a line under the betrayals conducted by ASLEF and the RMT. The determination and solidarity built up in two years of struggle has been divided and squandered to facilitate the corporatist relations between the companies and the unions now being finalised under the Starmer government. The union bureaucracy has forfeited any claim to represent the most basic interests of rail workers and demonstrated the need for rank-and-file committees opposed to the system of closed-door talks with management, vetoes of strike mandates and sellout deals.

What the rail struggle underscores in that workers are confronted not with trade union struggles, but a political fight against a brutal agenda of "restructuring," at the expense of jobs and terms and conditions, started under the Tories and being continued under Labour in the interests of corporate profit and government austerity.



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