

Southern rail conductors begin longest UK rail strike in 50 years

By Robert Stevens
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Train conductors employed by Southern began a five-day strike Monday. Southern, a private franchise owned by Govia Thameslink (GTR), plans to impose Driver Only Operation (DOO) on its routes by August 21, threatening conductors' jobs and livelihoods.

Train conductors perform safety critical roles, including the operation of train doors. Under the system of Driver Only Operation (DOO), these duties would be forced on the driver, with conductors downgraded into becoming full-time revenue collectors, with no job security.

The strike, the latest in the dispute, is the longest rail stoppage in England in 50 years, since a 12-day walkout in 1968, when the state-owned British Rail operated the UK's rail network.

Southern is the main rail operator for the counties of Sussex and east Surrey and runs vital services to London, Kent, Hampshire and Buckinghamshire.

GTR's attacks are being spearheaded at the highest levels of government, as the official policy of the Conservative government is for DOO to be introduced nationally. Just before standing down as Prime Minister, David Cameron used Prime Ministers Questions to make a high profile attack on the Southern conductors.

In response to a request from a Tory MP that he condemn the strike, "not over jobs, not over wages, but over who gets to press a button [to open and close doors]", Cameron replied, "I condemn any industrial action that disrupts the travelling public, and rail passengers will not thank the RMT and ASLEF [rail unions] for their recent unnecessary disruption."

As the strike began, a tweet from the office of Cameron's successor, Theresa May, read Downing St: "The Prime Minister strongly condemns the strike action. We are deeply disappointed."

In an article in the Conservative-supporting *Telegraph*, David Leam, infrastructure director at London First, a lobby group for the capital's businesses, denounced the strike as "ludicrous, shameless and wrong". Leam was a Special Adviser to three Secretaries of State for Transport under the 1997-2010 Labour government.

In a statement which could apply to any worker, Leam stated, "The underlying issue here is the prevalence of outdated

working practices, which contribute to the high-cost culture of Britain's railways." The railways have been "tremendously successful in attracting new passengers they have been much less so at improving their efficiency," he continued. The attacks on conductors' jobs were necessary as, "Workers in all walks of life need to adapt and change as new technologies emerge. Modern trains no more need a guard to close doors than they need a fireman to shovel coal or be preceded by a man with a red flag to alert fearful passers-by."

Urging the government to go on the offensive, Leam said the dispute "raises the question whether government is, in fact, being too timid."

In reality, Southern GTR is the worst performing private rail franchise in the UK and its entire operation is an indictment of the privatisation of the rail network. It has the worst cancellation rate of any franchise and has not recruited the necessary staff to run an operation vital to the economy, responsible for facilitating 165 million passenger journeys per year. Reports have emerged that because of constant cancellations and delays, a number of commuters have ended up losing their jobs. Service has been so threadbare that commuters have protested regularly. Despite relentless company and government propaganda against conductors, many passengers support the strikes.

By July, Southern was already cancelling around 250 trains a day. The service had collapsed to such an extent that Southern was forced, in agreement with the government, to committee to a basic level of service. An emergency timetable was introduced, with fully 350 trains a day cancelled from its service. As a result of the emergency timetable, under legislation favourable to the privatised franchises, Southern receives no financial penalties for cancelled services while passengers continue to suffer.

In response to the reduction of services, commuters organised further angry protests against Southern.

The unions, however, oppose mobilising their members against this politically-led offensive against both rail workers and commuters. In an August 5 statement, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) noted that GTR is "being set up as a testing ground for a national union-busting experiment." However, the RMT played down the significance of this,

stating, “That nonsense should be stopped right now” and the union “allowed to get back to normal industrial relations, free from outside interference.”

In preparation for DOO, Southern have already advertised for “on-board supervisors”, with no responsibility for train safety and a much-reduced rate of pay.

The 393 members of the RMT at Southern supported the strike by a massive majority. On an 81 percent turnout, 306 workers voted to strike, representing 77 percent of the total membership.

The determination of conductors to oppose the company’s plans was seen in their solid support for the strike. The stoppage caused widespread disruption with Southern stating that 946 trains out of 2,242 services (60 percent) would be cancelled each day of the strike. Southern have also drafted in many managers to run trains in a pre-planned strikebreaking operation.

There is evidence that the strike had a deeper impact than the company admits. A number of routes, including the line from Hurst Green to Uckfield and between Redhill and Tonbridge, did not operate any service at all.

The only reason that any services are running at all on Southern’s network is because the rail unions have already previously agreed that DOO services can be run on many lines now under Southern’s control.

In this, the rail unions are implementing official Conservative government policy. The attack on conductors’ roles stem from the 2012 McNulty recommendations; the Lord hired by the last Labour government to slash 20,000 jobs, impose backbreaking productivity increases and remove the assumption of automatic annual pay increases. The Tory government adopted the report as policy in 2014.

The RMT has suspended scheduled strikes against DOO on a number of occasions. Once again, in the days leading to the Southern strike, they did everything possible to ensure this week’s strike did not go ahead. First off, the RMT agreed to hold talks with management under the auspices of the ACAS arbitration service.

Last week it suspended strike action by workers employed by ScotRail over DOO, after reaching an initial agreement with the company. It then offered the same deal to Southern. On Friday, two days after boasting of suspending all ScotRail industrial action, RMT leader Mick Cash wrote to Southern managing director Charles Horton, pleading, “The offer this union is making to Southern is as agreed with Abellio Scotrail this week, an agreement that enabled us to suspend our industrial action.”

Cash said the deal “guaranteed a Conductor on every train”, that “the Conductor will retain their full competency (rules, track safety, evacuation)” and that ScotRail “confirmed that trains operating these services will not run without a competent Conductor on board.”

But the union stressed, “These proposals, including the above

guarantees, are subject to ScotRail and the RMT entering into discussion about, and agreeing to, a method of train dispatch for these services. Once this proposal and the method of dispatch are agreed it will be adopted for the Abellio ScotRail franchise and will apply beyond”.

This would be the thin end of the wedge as talks over the “method of train dispatch” can result, on the basis of further union collaboration, the removal of the responsibility of the conductor from train door operations and eventual elimination of their role.

According to a study published in 2013 by McNulty, around 30 percent of all UK rail passenger services are DOO. The percentage is certainly higher today.

The rail unions have already agreed to this with London Overground (LO) in an operation that saw the elimination of 130 conductors from its trains serving 112 stations. As well as LO, many DOO services operate in and around London on some of the busiest routes in the UK. GTR run entirely DOO operations on its Thameslink and Great Northern routes. Twelve-car DOO trains now operate on Great Northern’s busy commuter line between London’s King’s Cross and Peterborough.

This attempt by the union to end the dispute on terms favourable to the company followed a July 8 open letter to Horton from Cash in which he pledged, “The RMT will suspend calling any further industrial for the next three months if you will also suspend your proposals for a similar period.”

Rail workers throughout the UK are facing the brunt of an onslaught attacking their jobs, wages and conditions. Along with the ScotRail and Southern disputes, workers on the Merseyrail local franchise around Liverpool are also currently in dispute over DOO.

Train drivers on Southern trains and Gatwick Express services are balloting for strike action against the imposition of new rosters and 1,000 station and ticket office staff are balloting over the closure of ticket offices and imposition of a new role of station host.

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