

“This is about the public and their safety”

Striking UK rail conductors explain their struggle for public safety

By our reporters
14 March 2017

Sheffield

At Sheffield station’s Arriva North depot, three pickets manned a stall.

Joe, who was previously a ticket officer, explained the safety role of conductors: “In case of emergency you’ve got two safety-critical staff on board trains in the Arriva North franchise. Under the new proposals that’s going down to one.”

The drivers would have sole responsibility for the platform-train interface, including emergency evacuations and assisting the disabled. “A lot of the stations we call at are unmanned, so there’s no staff to help people get on and off. If they’re going to be running trains without us, who’s going to be helping these people?”

In his experience, “even at manned stations, you don’t always have time with all your other duties, so it helps to have a conductor there to help people on and off. The way it’s portrayed in the media, it’s just about who’s going to open and close the doors. But we fulfil a safety-critical role and all of a sudden the safety rule book is being thrown out.”

Mark, the depot’s health and safety rep, said conductors dealt with a range of incidents, “It’s evacuations, fires on trains--we’ve had that recently. There’s three types of evacuations, but emergency evacuations—in the event of a collision or endangerment to life--are the most important. You’ve got to get passengers off as quickly as possible in the safest possible way.”

Mark and Joe explained that in train collisions, where the driver may be critically injured or killed, the safety of hundreds of passengers would rest on the conductors. They were also trained to prevent wider catastrophic outcomes, alerting signal control and emergency services, walking along the tracks, sounding detonators and signalling an emergency to oncoming trains.

WSWS reporters referred to last September’s derailment at Watford, where the injured driver was trapped in his cabin and the conductor successfully evacuated passengers, including those critically injured. “He did a cracking job,” Mark commented, pointing to the months of training which conductors undergo before starting on the job.

A reporter pointed to the opposition of conductors and drivers to Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains and the role of ASLEF and the RMT in dividing this opposition. At Southern Rail, ASLEF had ignored a strike vote against DOO, re-entering negotiations with management. He asked, “What happened to the democratic will of the membership?”

“That’s what we’d like to know,” replied one of the reps.

Leeds and Huddersfield

At Leeds railway station there were about 15 pickets and five at Huddersfield. A local Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) rep at Leeds said, “Looking at the Southern strike, we think our dispute is going to be a long one and the company is not willing to move. We demand there is somebody on board who can carry out critical duties for the public’s safety.

“They (Arriva Northern Rail) are contracted to bring in driver controlled operation, but there are different methods of driver controlled operation, and they are not willing to meet us halfway to guarantee that second safety critical person on board the train that other companies have agreed to such as ScotRail.”

While the unions have held up ScotRail as a model, the reality is that drivers there are working under a form of DOO. The rep concluded, “We would like the railways to be re-nationalised. Any public service should be in public hands. Privatization just means profits, profits, profits.

They are asset stripping--every single company.”

Liverpool

At Liverpool, an Arriva Northern conductor of 40 years explained, “There was an incident four or six weeks ago, a man threw himself off a bridge near Burtonwood on the Manchester line, landing in the driver’s cabin. The conductor took over and phoned signals, otherwise there could have been carnage. There are so many incidents that need the conductor, for example the recent landslip on the line [at Liverpool Lime Street station]--without a guard to guide passengers safely off the train they would have been in limbo.”

A lot could be done to improve safety, but “its cost. We have private companies and the shareholders count... I saw a programme on TV about the railways in Japan. They have screens at the end of the platform which open and close when the doors of the train open and close.”

“I’m 61, if we don’t fight to keep our jobs, where will the young people find work. It’s that and safety that matters.”

His colleague, a conductor of 13 years standing, said, “We’re fighting the government and the Department of Transport. The government and the companies have been thinking years in advance how to get rid of conductors. It started with the McNulty report to cut costs.”

Asked for his opinion on the role of the unions, he replied, “They let it happen, with divide and conquer.”

Another conductor, with 25 years’ service, slammed the ongoing frame-up of fellow Merseyrail conductor Martin Zee, who was charged and faces a possible two-year jail term after a passenger fell onto the railway tracks while trying to board a train: “Martin Zee shouldn’t be in the dock. It’s scandalous--he saved a life. If he is found guilty we have no security, no guidelines. Every day when we come into work, we could be on a manslaughter charge. If Martin is found guilty, the whole network should be out. This case is a political move to get shut of all conductors. It’s all profit related in the interests of the shareholders.”

The rail companies looked on conductors as deadbeats, he said. “It’s divide and rule. In 1993, the difference between our pay and drivers’ pay was £3,000—now it’s £18,000. Our wages haven’t kept up and that’s down to the unions. The drivers support us. No driver wants to be on their own. If a disabled lady is struggling to get on the train, is the driver going to leave his cabin and help her?”

Another conductor, a seaman before joining the railways seven years ago, said that while he supported Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, “The working class

needs new socialist organisations. Labour won’t renationalise the railways. We need millions on the streets across the country, never mind 40 on a picket line. We need a revolution.”

He recalled previous attacks on the working class, including the 1989 Hillsborough disaster--in which 96 Liverpool football supporters died at a football stadium--which he witnessed, and the police assault on Orgreave pickets during the 1984-85 miners’ strike. “45,000 were screaming at Labour MP Andy Burnham--he had to call an inquiry [over Hillsborough]. But there’ll never be a real public inquiry. Remember Orgreave? Thatcher instigated that. Tony Blair--he should be in jail. Socialism has gone out of this city—I feel ashamed that people are left to sleep on the streets.”

Manchester

At Manchester Piccadilly, a guard with more than a decade’s experience said, “I am on strike today because this is an issue that affects not just me, but also the public and their safety.”

Asked about Arriva North’s claims that they intended to run 40 percent of planned services during the strike, he said this was reckless endangerment of public safety as management was using office staff with little training. He was concerned that the dispute had ever got this far: “The unions should have prevented the introduction of driver only trains right from the beginning.”

At Manchester’s second largest station, Victoria, 15 strikers were on picket duty. One said, “We have all dealt with serious issues on trains, including fires and evacuating the entire train.”

Another added, “This is all about profit. It costs train companies so many millions a year to employ conductors. The companies calculate the compensation costs if there are, say, two fatalities on the railways each year, and how much can be saved if they have already slashed costs by getting rid of guards on trains.”

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