

UK train conductors strike three rail companies

By Robert Stevens
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Train conductors at Arriva Rail North, Merseyrail and Southern Rail struck Monday to oppose the planned introduction of Driver Only Operated services (DOO). Management's proposals, backed to the hilt by the Conservative government, would lead to the loss of thousands of conductors' jobs and undermine public safety.

The strike demonstrates of the strength of the working class. Although the walkout involved only 2,000 conductors nationally, the rail firms were forced to cancel far more services than expected—with well over a 1,000 scheduled train journeys halted.

At Merseyrail, many drivers belonging to the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) union refused to cross picket of conductors who are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union. Only minimal services ran on the network, with all services ceasing at 7pm. Between 11am and 2pm, Merseyrail was forced to suspend all trains.

Merseyrail normally transports 110,000 passengers each weekday, via 67 railway stations on one of the most heavily used rail networks outside London. Whole sections of the network were halted, with no trains running between Hunts Cross/Kirkby and Liverpool Central and between Ellesmere Port and James Street. Services did not run to many stations, including Bidston, Birkenhead Park, Conway Park and Manor Park.

A Merseyrail spokesman said the firm was not able to run its previously advertised timetable, as “train drivers, who are not part of the industrial action taking place on the Merseyrail network today, have decided not to cross RMT picket lines.”

Arriva Rail North and Merseyrail have refused to relent on plans to introduce DOO over the next three

years. Merseyrail is procuring a new £460 million fleet of trains by 2020, designed to enable drivers to entirely control the opening and closing of doors—one of the main roles of conductors who are trained in up to 35 safety critical tasks. The plan, if implemented will result in the loss of 220 conductors' jobs at Merseyrail.

Arriva Rail North, which covers rail services connecting cities including Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle, claimed around 40 percent of services ran Monday. However, no services ran before 7am, with trains stopping completely from 5pm to 7pm. The strike's impact resulted in Arriva Rail North having to hire 300 buses to transport passengers. The two main stations in Manchester—Piccadilly and Victoria—were much quieter than normal with Victoria's concourses and platforms empty during the morning rush hour.

At Southern, conductors and drivers have been fighting plans to introduce DOO over the last year. In striking Monday, RMT members at Southern were taking their 30th day of intermittent job actions. According to Southern it ran nearly a full service, after it drafted in managers and other scabs to replace conductors.

However, Southern has constantly inflated figures during strikes. Many of its planned services to and from London did not run, with several lines completely unable to operate. The propaganda was belied by scenes of many virtually empty and quiet train stations in various towns and cities.

The RMT noted in a March 9 press release, “The company claims on the number of trains that they are set to run are bogus, rigged and not borne out by the passenger feedback on strike days...” It added, “Managers from elsewhere in GTR operations are being swung in at considerable cost, both in cash terms

and disruption to work elsewhere, to try and break the strike.”

Last month, Go-Ahead, which owns 65 percent of Southern's operator Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), reported that half-year profits from its rail business had fallen 35 percent to £26.9 million.

Letting the cat out of the bag as to what the rail companies eventually want to impose, Angie Doll, Southern's passenger services director said Monday, “Our on-board supervisors [the job title conductors are being forced into] are now established in their roles and passengers are beginning to see the benefits of having someone whose sole job is customer service.” In other words, underpaid staff will operate solely as revenue collectors, with no responsibilities for public safety.

The strike proves the willingness of transport workers to fight the destruction of their terms, conditions and livelihoods. The action by the ASLEF drivers at Merseyrail was in direct opposition to the ongoing sabotage of their struggle by the trade union bureaucracy. Since the beginning of the Southern dispute, the unions have sought to divide conductors and guards from waging a unified offensive against DOO, which is the spearhead of attacks on gains rail workers have won over generations.

Last month, Southern GTR drivers, members of ASLEF, voted down a sell-out deal that fully accepted DOO, negotiated by the union under the auspices of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Following its rejection, Southern management and ASLEF have resumed private talks at a secret location.

Despite describing the actions of ASLEF as a “historical betrayal,” the RMT kept up the division of drivers and conductors by insisting that the deal was an internal affair of ASLEF's, blocking any common struggle of rail workers.

The offensive against rail workers is set to intensify with the Department of Transport's announcement that DOO must be included by whichever private firm wins the next two franchises due to be awarded, South Western and West Midlands.

Opposed to joint action by its more than 80,000 members at the three rail companies, RMT officials have simply called for more negotiations. Even though conductors are fighting the same attacks, the RMT issued separate press releases regarding each company. For Arriva Rail North, the union said, “It is now down

to the company to get that pledge back on the table and engage with the union in talks over a safe and sustainable future built around the guarantee of a guard on the trains.” Regarding the Southern strike, the RMT declared, “[I]t is about time Southern/GTR got out of the bunker and got back round the table with the union in serious and meaningful talks.” Merseyrail management should get out of “the bunker and started serious talks with the union that secure a safe future for their services and the guarantee of a guard on their trains.”

As for ASLEF, the union has refused to even report on its web site or twitter account that its members struck in solidarity with conductors at Merseyrail.

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