

UK rail workers continue strikes against Driver Only Operated train plans

By Michael Barnes
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The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* support conductors who are striking six private rail franchises this week in their ongoing opposition to the introduction of Driver Only Operated (DOO) train services and mass job losses.

Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) at Southern, South Western Railways (SWR), Greater Anglia, Merseyrail, Northern Rail and at the Isle of Wight's Island Line will strike today, Wednesday and Friday causing major disruptions. Northern Rail alone is being forced to cancel nearly half of its scheduled services.

The rail companies are organising a well-rehearsed state-sponsored strike-breaking operation. According to evidence gathered by the RMT, this includes co-ordinated action between numerous private rail franchises to bus in managers and backroom staff with minimal training, so as to help run rail services during the stoppages.

The danger to public safety posed by DOO trains was underscored ahead of strikes last November, when a SWR passenger service train derailed in South London. This followed a derailment at Watford Junction by two London Midland trains, narrowly avoiding a head on collision. In these incidents, the collaboration of drivers and conductors was vital for passenger safety.

On December 7, a Merseyrail tunnel filled with smoke, with the RMT reporting, “The guard evacuated passengers from a Northern Line service at Moorfields station... after smoke began billowing into the front carriage as the train entered the single-bore tunnel after leaving Sandhills station.”

As dangerous incidents begin to escalate, the rail companies and the Tory government refuse to retreat in their war against conductors' jobs.

The opposition of rail workers, however, stands in

sharp contrast to the RMT, which has repeatedly organised partial strikes and blocked workers' demands for a national strike, while seeking to sow the illusion that the government can be persuaded to step in and oppose DOO. The RMT, the train drivers' union ASLEF and other unions oppose a broader mobilisation of the working class against the Theresa May government and its programme of austerity, privatization, and other giveaways to the super-rich.

According to RMT officials it is only the “dead hand” of the government that is blocking it from reaching deals with the rail firms. This is despite the fact that every action by the Tory government and the Labour Party confirms that they are agents of the global transport monopolies who run the rail franchises.

The government is backing the Rail Delivery Group (RDG), made up of millionaire CEOs from all the private rail companies. It is tasked with imposing 20,000 job cuts based on recommendations in Lord McNulty's 2011 report—known as the “Rail Value for Money Study.” McNulty recommended DOO as the default method for train operations, with a total of 6,000 conductors' jobs threatened nationally if DOO is imposed.

The RMT's opposition to mobilising the 83,000 rail workers in the union has given the government a free hand to implement its strike-breaking operation, organised from Transport Secretary's Chris Grayling office. The Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) —which claims to be independent but is directly accountable to government—has rubber-stamped the operation, just as they justified DOO expansion.

The ORR's support has been made necessary after the RMT reported a series of safety breaches during last October's strikes. The most serious occurred when a strike breaker opened the passenger doors on the

wrong side at Ipswich station, with passengers having to climb down onto the tracks. The employers have refused RMT requests for figures on safety breaches on strike days.

The government and unions want industrial action off the agenda. While criticising the government, the RMT have jumped at every opportunity to hold talks with government officials behind the backs of rail workers. On December 12, Grayling sent an appeal to RMT General Secretary Mick Cash to end strikes “on Northern, Southern, Greater Anglia, and South West Railway.” He said, “I am prepared to give guarantees of employment beyond the length of these franchises, if this will allow RMT to bring its disputes over DCO [Driver Control Operation] to an end. If the RMT can agree to the principle of DCO...”

Significantly, Grayling did not mention Merseyrail. In a principled stand, drivers there have defied the leadership of the ASLEF rail driver union and continued to refuse to cross conductor pickets on strike days in defiance of anti-strike laws.

The talks failed as Cash knew he could not enforce such a deal, openly endorsing DOO, at this stage. This is not because the RMT is averse to agreeing such deals. Rather, it is proof that rail unions and the Tories had not counted on the determination of rail workers to resist these attacks and the scale of public support for the strikes.

In an attempt to break up the unified strikes, the RMT entered separate negotiations with SWR, which ultimately failed. In the face of reported safety breaches, strike breakers will operate 12-carriage trains on SWR during this week’s strikes, according to London’s *Evening Standard*.

The RMT long ago abandoned its campaign against McNulty’s recommendations—Tory government policy since 2012—after they were given a consultation role with the Rail Delivery Group. The unions justified being in talks with an organisation committed to slashing 20,000 jobs, saying it allowed them to combat attacks on terms and conditions when they are first aired.

This lie was proven at Southern, as ASLEF collaborated in imposing DOO against striking conductors and the RMT recommendation—even prior to this—that conductors sign up to terminating the conductor grade and accept the On Board Supervisor

role (a precursor to the elimination of the conductor role).

While demagogically attacking the RDG as a “bosses club,” the RMT is ensconced in secret negotiations with the management of its constituent parts. The RMT previously described ASLEF’s support for DOO at Southern as a “historical betrayal,” but it is now working closely again with the train driver union to prevent more strikes breaking out of the control of the bureaucracy.

Liverpool Labour Party Mayor Joe Anderson denounced the November Merseyrail strikes, publicly supporting the removal of conductors. In response, the RMT redoubled their orientation to the Labour Party—trumpeting a statement issued by West Yorkshire Labour councils calling for the implementation of the “ScotRail formulae” on Northern Rail services. The RMT never opposed these councils for not blocking DOO proposals when the existing franchise was first agreed.

The ScotRail formulae, where the driver opens doors and the conductor closes them, is nothing more than a temporary staging post for the removal of conductors entirely. The RMT praised the role of the Scottish National Party government for supporting its ScotRail deal and demanded it be imposed across the UK. Only a year later, plans are underway for Glasgow’s underground network to be totally de-staffed after an investment of £288 million. Driverless trains will be trialled later this year on a stretch of track, with the plan to introduce them throughout the network by the end of 2020.

The Socialist Equality Party urges rail workers to form rank-and-file committees to break free from the grip of the trade union bureaucracy and mobilise the broadest support in the working class against these attacks. These committees should not only seek to unite rail workers throughout the UK, but reach out to their brothers and sisters facing similar attacks in Germany, France, Spain and across the European continent.

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