

“It’s about safety but the train operating companies want to save money”

UK rail worker speaks to the WSWs about dispute over Driver Only Operated trains

By our reporter
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The World Socialist Web Site spoke to Peter, a guard/conductor at one of the UK’s private train franchises, about the struggle against the planned introduction of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains. DOO is being planned by train-operating companies (TOCs) across the network nationally, threatening thousands of jobs and public safety.

“I have done various jobs on the railway,” Peter said. “I have done platform staff, I have covered supervisory roles. It is only in the last four years that things got tough, very tough in terms of attacks on terms and conditions.”

He identified the beginning of this offensive to impose DOO with the publication of the McNulty report in 2011.

“It is an attack on jobs, and people need to read it because you have got the [Conservative/Liberal Democrat] coalition government at the time, but it was commissioned by the Labour government.

“McNulty was paid an extraordinary amount of money to write it. It goes into the fact that DOO is a default operation. It promotes agency staff [hiring through temporary agencies]. That is when the trouble started. At the time, we had a Tory-led coalition government, so they were just going to go ahead with this as fits in with their ideology.

“They were keen to start with the Southern franchise for DOO—we all knew it—to see what they could get away with. Southern and Great Northern is a franchise with a difference, because it’s a management contract for passenger services on the Thameslink and Great Northern routes to Bedford, Luton, Peterborough, King’s Lynn, Cambridge.

“Southern operate trains from London serving parts of Kent, East & West Sussex, Hampshire and Surrey. They were going to amalgamate the Thameslink along with Southern, make it one big franchise. There were only half a dozen depots left on the Southern routes with guards, and because Thameslink was already without guards, we all surmised at work that they would amalgamate the Southern depots. They would try and get rid of the guards there. This is exactly what has happened.”

Peter spoke about the on-board supervisor role that has been imposed at Southern rail to replace the safety-critical role of the guard.

“It is really interesting because the train drivers’ union ASLEF did a deal, and when you speak to the RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport union] members, they would say we were done over. You can imagine working in that toxic environment, because when that deal that was put through in 2016, ASLEF only put out a circular with two pages.

So, drivers were saying, ‘Oh well, our salary is going to increase. There’s only a few conditions changing.’ Then suddenly a deal comes out and it’s 19 pages long, so now the Southern drivers have got the worst conditions on the railway.

“They did not realise what they were signing up to. The older drivers are now saying, ‘We can’t cope with this. I am going.’ ASLEF was saying, ‘We are going to vote on this’ and the drivers turn around and say, ‘No, we are not accepting this.’ And then there’s another vote and another vote, and it’s basically voting till they get what they want. That is the way it looked to us because there were several votes and we were saying at work ASLEF are pushing and pushing to make sure they got the deal they wanted.”

On the role of the unions, Peter said, “They are not interested in a fight against DOO. I don’t know if you have seen the picture with RMT and ASLEF. They had this promotional shot where Mick Cash [RMT leader] was standing there with Mick Whelan [ASLEF leader] and they had this big song going that ‘We both agree no more extension of DOO.’ They were pledging we were not going to see an extension, but a reverse and bringing back the guards that were missing. Members were saying they have done it as a leverage for money. That’s all it was, especially ASLEF. They were in it for the money.

“ASLEF are not interested in their membership. That’s proved time and time again. When you come into our place of work, drivers feel disillusioned with ASLEF because they are running roughshod over the workers.

Peter explained that the culture of safety on the railway and the critical part of the guard’s job have been undermined in the last decade.

“The RMT has lost the plot about the safety-critical role of the guard. What is the guard there to do in its essence? To maintain safety. To maintain a level of customer care, but also in the case of emergency. That is a big thing.

“Guards must complete an extensive course in safety. It is six months. We have a rules exam every two years. We have traction routes exams, so we know where we are, we know where we are going. If you are on the railway and you need to get in touch with a signal man, say when you make an emergency call, you need to know where you are. You need to know the head code of the train, everything about the route you are on, because you might need access for emergency vehicles.

“A few years ago, there was the [2016] Watford crash. Both guards played a vital role in securing the trains and sorting the passengers out. I was working that day, and it was being spoken about late into that evening between colleagues. I did not know the entirety of what happened until after the day was over. The guard was essential. The passengers were being looked after by the guards. One of the guards got commended for her actions on the day because not only did she keep the train safe, she looked after the passengers while emergency services were dealing with serious problems.

“We were told she did a wonderful job, in fact they both did, a male and female, the older guard with 25/26 years of service. That knowledge of customer service, to keep everybody calm and prevent panic, to understand the operations, what the problem was, how can we deal with it, was invaluable. They kept the train safe, but the reporters never made much of it. They were just interested in the role of the driver.

“One of the drivers could not get out of his cab, so if you had not had a guard on that train it would have been mass panic. They did a wonderful job, but it was never brought out to the wider attention of people, and we know exactly why. Because the role of the guard is under attack, as are the roles of platform staff, and they want to keep it low-key and not go against government policy. We thought the RMT would have used this as a catalyst, to underline the common sense of having a properly safe functional guard on board services. Unfortunately, that never happened!

“For me, first and foremost, it is safety. If you go into a guard’s course, the first thing they say is, ‘Safety, safety, safety.’ It is paramount because you are the eyes and ears on the railway, especially on the trains. Yes, you have the interaction with platform staff, but you are also there as a backup for the driver.

“My role is to operate the doors safely to make sure passengers don’t get trapped. The RMT have said it doesn’t matter about the doors, when it’s a vital part of the job. There are passengers that need assistance, especially when it comes to wheelchairs, the visually impaired. The ramps need operating too, and how can all of that be done safely when the guard no longer has door control? I am trained in evacuation, the dispatch process, something we call PTI, platform train interface, which is a really big thing on the railway—the monitoring of platforms prior to boarding, making sure no one is trapped—to have that extra pair of eyes and ears, especially at stations that are unmanned.

“A lot of accidents have happened mainly through DOO services, but they never seem to highlight that. Whenever we watch the Red Safety videos in training briefs, which are available on YouTube and are the industry standard, there are instances highlighting the dangers of DOO.

“The current attack on my job, the onboard supervisor role, for example on Southern, that is what will happen on other franchises, Greater Anglia, MerseyRail and West Midlands Trains. My job is vital for safety, and without control of the doors, you have lost everything. RMT are saying, ‘If you have got a safety-critical person on the train that carries out all these job functions, the 30 safety-critical job functions they are basing themselves on in negotiations, then it does not matter if you lose the doors.’

“No. If you lose the doors, you’re finished. Game over. You will be replaced by a cheaper, less safety-trained, possibly zero-hours contract worker to make more money for the TOCs. On the safety course, operation of the doors and PTI takes up around 70 percent of it.

“You have to understand that the railway industry is like no other industry in the country. You have a train, a driver, a signaller, you have a guard, you have platform staff—they are essential as well. They are the key ingredients, and you, the guard, plays a vital role because without you the train does not go anywhere. It is hammered home that safety is paramount. You need to know how to operate the doors especially on a 12-carriage train. You need to keep an eye on people and keep your concentration up for anything that could be an issue, like late runners or people that need a bit longer to board because of higher platforms, for example.

The evolution of the guard has gone from somebody who is operational, an essential part of the operation, to somebody who we can now get rid of and make it DOO. ‘We can save millions of pounds. We can get rid of the guards, and then maybe we can re-employ them as casuals,’ that’s what they’re thinking.

“We have disabled people on the train. I will go and assist more-vulnerable passengers. I sometimes have to act as liaison with the police. I have had a missing person on my train, a young missing person. The job function is more than just safety-critical, it’s a counsellor, it’s fraud protection, it’s a friendly yet professional face of the service that people are paying for. What the companies want is a security guard, who is not trained and not particularly bothered.

“Some of the large TOCs employ over 500 guards, and around 6,000 jobs are threatened by the introduction of DOO services nationally. The only one that hasn’t been attacked is Arriva Wales. The Welsh government said, ‘No we are keeping the safety-critical, operational guard.’ So, Arriva have said we are not bidding for the franchise, we are out.

“Abellio are the big ones, the big instigators of DOO because they have tried it on Merseyrail. They are almost there after the RMT sellout on Great Anglia, the ScotRail franchise and now West Midlands. That is a massive chunk of the country. West Midlands is made up of Abellio Mitusi, a few companies not just solely Abellio, but Abellio are at the forefront. They’ve got fingers in lots of pies, and they are the Dutch state, as well.

“Abellio has got a great chunk of the Midlands, whereas Govia has a great chunk of the Southern regions. They want a couple of major franchises going in and out of London. If you have 12 carriages, you have around 1,000 people. Would you have an airplane go up in the air without cabin crew? What if it goes wrong? It may not happen. but what if it happened? The 1987 Kings Cross rail disaster happened. Big disasters have happened in the past, and the guard played an essential role.”

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