

No to driver only operated services at West Midland Trains! For a national mobilisation of rail workers

By Michael Barnes
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Strikes against plans to introduce Driver Only Operated (DOO) train services at South West Trains and Arriva Trains Northern continue this weekend. The determination of workers to fight these attacks is seen in the fact that the strike by the Arriva Northern conductors will be the 14th consecutive Saturday strike and nearly 40th overall.

They take place as conductors and drivers at West Midlands Trains (WMT) are resisting a coordinated effort by the private train operator Abellio and rail unions to impose DOO/DCO (Driver Controlled Operation) in 2020 with the arrival of new trains.

The aim of the company and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) is to deepen the isolation of striking conductors at other franchises who face well-funded strike-breaking operations supported by the Tory government.

In June, behind workers' backs, the RMT entered back room discussions on a Framework Agreement that states, "On such new or modified rolling stock, train drivers will operate the train doors and undertake train despatch in normal circumstances..."

As part of the Framework, all statements would be joint company/union to avoid "confusion." This demonstrates that the RMT is not accountable to its members but has fully integrated itself into the corporate structures.

Workers at WMT are being forced to accept an agreement that has not been discussed with them, with the RMT denying them the most elementary right to strike to protect their jobs.

When Abellio, the private arm of the Dutch state railways Nederlandse Spoorwegen, secured the franchise from London Midland (serving London, Birmingham, Northampton, Coventry, Crewe and Liverpool) it declared the new trains would be DOO enabled. It runs a host of bus and rail franchises across the UK and Europe.

Abellio's first act in charge was to train hundreds of managers as a strike-breaking force. Abellio and rail unions

have already jointly imposed forms of DOO on its franchises at ScotRail, Greater Anglia and are in advanced talks to impose DOO on its Merseyrail joint franchise after the RMT called off strikes by conductors that were supported by drivers throughout.

Once Abellio secured the new franchise it announced the new trains, to be rolled out in 2020, would be DOO enabled. When the WMT franchise was first announced by the Department for Transport they declared as one of its benefits "the implementation of Driver Controlled Operation (DCO)."

In 2016, regional RMT organiser for the Midlands, Ken Usher, declared they would oppose DOO at WMT as a direct threat to 500 conductors' jobs. But ever since the RMT have opposed calls for an industrial struggle and sought negotiations to push through DOO/DCO. They have placated opposition by claiming a second safety critical person will be retained—but who will essentially be stripped of the extensive safety responsibilities carried out by the majority of existing conductors. Conductors are now confronted with the full implications of the RMT's sleight of hand.

The treachery at WMT is the culmination of more than two years of phony posturing by the RMT as opponents of all forms of DOO. It confirms that the *World Socialist Web Site* is correct in its description of the rail unions as essential allies of the Tory government in imposing the recommendations of Lord McNulty.

McNulty was hired by the last Labour government to prepare a major assault on rail workers' jobs, wages and working conditions, beginning with 20,000 job cuts and the default imposing of DOO services. That any of this could have been imposed over the last seven years is the responsibility of the rail unions.

At Greater Anglia trains, RMT General secretary Mick Cash secured a DOO agreement after closing down all options for conductors in the face of a major strike-breaking

operation. Instead of expanding the struggle to other Abellio franchises, Cash used the isolation of the strike to pressure workers into a deal. He declared Greater Anglia as his model to impose DOO across the rest of the country.

Strikes on Merseyrail were cancelled and a similar Framework agreement was forced through. Merseyrail had become a powerful example to rail workers when drivers in the ASLEF union honoured conductors' picket lines, defying the government's draconian anti-strike laws. This pointed the way forward for workers to break out of the straightjacket imposed by the unions on the dispute and to conduct a serious struggle against DOO. It was a necessity for the Tory government and Merseyrail for this solidarity to be shut down and the RMT stepped up to the mark.

At WMT, the RMT called a town hall meeting not of members—as they feared their plans for a sellout would be stopped in their tracks—but of local representatives who voted overwhelmingly to enter negotiations. In tandem, ASLEF say they would wait for an RMT deal before they entered negotiations with WMT. ASLEF's action was only the latest in proving their track record on DOO to be as treacherous as the RMT's. Workers should treat with contempt any public spats between the bureaucracy of both unions, which are always reconciled after the sellout with solemn declarations of the importance of trade union unity.

When the RMT pushed through DOO or forms of DOO at London Overground, ScotRail and Greater Anglia, ASLEF imposed it on their members without organising any united action with conductors. The only exception was Southern GTR. In the face of state attacks, they called off strikes and imposed DOO in a deal brokered by the Trades Union Congress (TUC). After being rejected twice by drivers, ASLEF said there would be no return to strikes and they would continue balloting.

On Southern GTR, RMT officials now report that ASLEF are plotting full DOO train despatch. This affects not only conductors (the majority are now downgraded to On Board Supervisors on DOO trains) but hundreds of train despatch jobs.

If ASLEF again agree to DOO at WMT it is only a prelude to a frontal assault on their own members' jobs. The entire mechanism used to attack striking conductors across the UK will be turned against ASLEF drivers with a renewed force.

ASLEF are not opposing the introduction of driverless technology on Thameslink GTR services through London St Pancras to Blackfriars, where drivers take over the conductors role.

The Train Operating Companies are working to a long-term four-stage plan to de-staff the railways. The fourth stage is driverless trains across the network. Due to rail unions capitulation on DOO the time frame has been

reduced. Drivers should also take a warning from France where French President Emmanuel Macron and National Railways (SNCF) have forced through privatisation and are planning in the next four to six years driverless trains on the entire network.

Since Southern GTR conductors initiated a struggle against DOO, sparking disputes nationally that have lasted for over two and half years, the rail unions have proven that they are not workers organisations fighting in the interests of their members but are a corporate arm of management. They exist as a permanent conspiracy against the workers they claim to represent.

As well as suppressing workers' struggles against DOO, the RMT reports that management at Network Rail—the state controlled track and signal maintenance company—are riding roughshod over agreed procedures. However, they refuse to mobilise their 25,000 Network Rail members in opposition, which would result in an immediate shutdown of the entire rail network.

Rail workers are at a crossroads. Either the unions will retain control and impose sellout deals over DOO everywhere—followed by a massive assault on all wages and working conditions across the entire rail network—or workers will take the struggle into their own hands and open up an avenue of mass struggle.

This will require an open rebellion against the union bureaucracy! The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to mobilise conductors, drivers and platform staff in resistance against the rail unions' treachery. It urges the holding of mass meetings independently of the unions, with the election of rank-and-file committees in every depot. A joint offensive must be organised for a national strike against privatisation, job losses, wage cuts and draconian anti-worker legislation. Links must be made with bus, metro and London Underground and other workers who are fighting the same attacks on their jobs, terms and conditions.

The committees must demand an end to DOO in all its forms and establish worker control of all aspects of safety, to ensure a safe and affordable rail system for workers and passengers alike.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>