

Fascists surround rail workers' picket line in Manchester, England

By Margot Miller
10 January 2019

Far right activists surrounded a Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union picket line at Victoria station in Manchester last Saturday and verbally abused the striking guards.

RMT members at Arriva North were on their 43rd day of strike action in the long-running dispute against driver only operated (DOO) trains.

No national or local newspaper reported the incident, even though the disruption caused by fascists in Manchester city centre lasted for hours and required a substantial police presence, including police vans.

The provocation began with a march of about 40 thugs waving Union Jacks and voicing their support for Brexit. They wore yellow vests, seeking to politically exploit popular support for ongoing protests against French President Emmanuel Macron. It was part of a day of activity by the far-right, including a London demonstration where around 70 people tried to block Westminster Bridge and Parliament Street, leading to some arrests. Their main demand was for a no-deal Brexit, with Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May denounced as a traitor. A planned march in Leicester failed to materialise.

The Manchester protesters wore merchandise proclaiming their affiliation to the Democratic Football Lads Alliance, which brings together the rump of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the English Defence League (EDL) and various neo-Nazi groups. They called for the release of EDL founder Tommy Robinson, jailed last May for contempt of court after he live-streamed a tirade against “Muslim paedophiles” and “Muslim rapists” outside Leeds Crown court at the conclusion of a child-grooming trial.

Among the fascists in Manchester, according to the *Morning Star*, were British National Party candidate for Liverpool Mayor, Mike Whitby, who has a criminal

record for racial offenses. A short rally was held outside Manchester's Central Library before the fascists marched in the city centre eventually reaching Victoria station, where they tried to intimidate the RMT pickets.

The picket line was surrounded, with racist chants directed against London's Labour Party Mayor Sadiq Khan. An RMT picketer of south-east Asian heritage was verbally abused as a “sex offender” and a “paedophile.”

One picketer explained, “I happened to be in the same pub as a number of [the thugs] after the event and overheard them saying that they were going to go back and ‘break some pickets’ noses’.”

The Manchester attack is the second on RMT members in the last six months. Assistant General Secretary of the union, Steve Hedley, was brutally assaulted in London last July 14. Hedley and his partner Bridget were among several people ambushed by supporters of Tommy Robinson following a Stand Up To Racism (SUTR) demonstration.

Hedley, a supporter of the Socialist Party, was drinking in the Westminster Arms pub with other RMT members. Pictures and video showed Hedley bleeding heavily from a bandaged head wound. His Facebook account reported that Bridget was hit with a chair by one of the assailants and had to be admitted to hospital with breathing problems. At least one other person was cut on the head by a broken bottle.

Just three weeks later, Bookmarks, the bookshop of the Socialist Workers Party in London and the official bookseller of the Trades Union Congress, was attacked by around a dozen far right thugs. Those involved wore Donald Trump style red baseball caps as members of the group “Make Britain Great Again” (MBGA). Patrons of the group include Robert Oulds, chair of the

right-wing Tory think-tank the Bruges Group, and Elizabeth Jones, a member of the National Executive Committee of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Jones's brother, Luke Nash-Jones, led the attack on the bookshop.

The police have done nothing to prevent these attacks and allowed the RMT picket line to be surrounded before escorting the fascists through the station.

After the Manchester attack, Hedley called on the public to stand up for the strikers, urging support for the next picket and strike in Manchester, planned for January 12.

Social media postings suggest the fascists are preparing further attacks on RMT picket lines this weekend and in the future. The *Morning Star* reports that the organiser of the far-right protest, who goes by the name "Ashlea Robyn" on social media, sent a threatening message to the strikers, calling them "morons" and telling Hedley: "Don't pick battles you can't win."

Other threats have been issued by supporters of the DFLA Northern Division, "Liverpool Antifa [anti-fascist] are meant to be coming over for this, shall we give them a Manchester welcome, 12 Jan."

Despite the small number of far-right forces organised on this occasion, no-one should minimise the significance of an attack on a workers' picket line by fascists. If far right scum feel they can intimidate, verbally and physically assault strikers and union activists, it is because they have become emboldened in a political climate in which the ruling elite internationally has shifted sharply to the right and is turning to ultra-right and neo-fascist politicians and organisations to defend the capitalist system.

In the fight to defend their jobs and livelihoods, RMT members cannot rely on the trade unions. The RMT, as with that of the ASLEF drivers' union, has sabotaged the struggle against DOO—limiting action against the rail companies to regional, short-term strikes while signing deals with rail franchises at ScotRail and Greater Anglia that accept a form of DOO, with other sellouts underway at Merseyrail and West Midlands Trains.

To take this struggle forward, including defending their picket lines, rail workers must urgently form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. These must be based on mobilising rail workers

across every rail and bus franchise to oppose the destruction of jobs, pay and safety conditions and for a high quality and affordable public transport system for all.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>