off the rails

July 2023

Save ticket offices: Step up strikes!

RMT's July strikes are a welcome return to action. Three strikes in a nine-day period is an intensification relative to the previous pattern of striking for 24 or 48 hours, with weeks, or sometimes months, in between rounds of action.

Two of the strikes are on Saturdays, after many RMT branches and reps called for this, seeing it as potentially more effective than midweek strikes due to leisure travel having recovered to a higher level than midweek commuter travel.

The TOCs dispute began over a year ago with three strike days in one week. After a year of solid, but sporadic, action, the new strikes are the closest we've come to that level of action, and can launch us into further action.

But RMT still seems locked into calling one round of action at a time, then 'waiting and seeing' before calling any more. If a year of attritional strikes hasn't brought victory, three more days won't either. We need our unions to announce ongoing programmes of action over several months, with escalation built in.

Reps' assemblies can plan action in August and September, aiming to escalate to four days and beyond, including Saturdays and weekday. More money from the national dispute fund into local funds can help target payments to members who want to support the sustained action but can't afford to take the hit.

RMT has held protests against the recently-announced plans to close ticket offices. These bring us together with passenger groups, disability campaigners and other unions. And some Labour politicians are on board to oppose the closures.

Combined with an ongoing and intensified campaign of strikes, the public campaign could help push the TOCs and the government back on closures.

Aslef OT/RDW ban: a step back

Aslef has announced a week of overtime and rest-day-working (RDW) bans on fifteen TOCs, from 31 July to 5 August.

While action is better than no action, this is not enough to win the dispute. It's a step back from even the sporadic strikes we've held, which at least shut the job down for days at a time.

Aslef's journal hailed a "new strategy" of RDW bans. Dressing up what is effectively a de-escalation as a "new strategy" seems like selling snake oil to members.

It might take less strength in the short term to tread water than to swim to shore, but in the long term the risk of drowning is much higher.

Wot no Sundays?

None of the overtime / RDW bans include Sundays.

On the one hand, this is hugely weakens this type of action, especially where all Sunday working is rest day working.

But there is a logic to the exclusion of Sundays. Aslef is acting against multiple TOCs, all of which have different arrangements for Sunday working: Sundays in, Sundays out, 'committed Sundays', and differences within these differences!

Perhaps including Sundays in the ban would be too full of legal pitfalls to try on so many TOCs at once. But this reinforces that an on-off RDW ban, particularly one that deliberately misses out a day where it can have a big impact, is a step back.

Mick Whelan's day job

Aslef's press release announcing the OT/RDW bans from 31 July to 5 August, includes general secretary Mick Whelan saying that "we want a resolution. A fair resolution. That's why we are taking this action, to try to bring things to a head. Then I can concentrate on my day job working with others in the industry to rebuild Britain's railways for passengers, for business, and for this country."

Whelan is elected to lead and represent the interests of Aslef's members. He is not a participant in managing the industry in which they work.

Closing ticket offices has been a central aim of industry 'modernisers' for years, saving money through job cuts, displacements and re-grading.

Although contactless card payments, e-tickets and online platforms have reduced ticket offices' commercial purpose, they retain a value for passenger information and accessibility that cannot be measured purely in terms of money transactions.

TSSA to elect new General Secretary

Having removed Manuel Cortes, its disgraced general secretary, amid the exposure of a culture of sexist harassment and bullying, TSSA is to elect a replacement.

But you don't have to be a TSSA member to stand! You don't even have to be a transport worker. An external applicant will be on the ballot paper alongside internal candidates nominated by TSSA branches.

The Kennedy Report recommended that candidates for officer posts be sought from outside the union, due to concerns that internal candidates would not be fully independent from the awful cultures the report exposed.

But it is not democratic to allow non-members to stand for election to a representative post. TSSA members can judge fellow members by their activity in the union. But they can not properly scrutinise the record of external candidates. They will have only their CV and their words to go on.

This Kennedy Report recommendation is wrong. Allowing external applicants erodes democracy rather than strengthening it. Better to put in place stronger democratic checks and balances on the power of officials: expanding the number of elected posts; shortening terms of office; putting a limit on consecutive terms; and cutting the whopping general secretary's salary of £103,523 to a level equivalent to that of an average transport worker.

Unite contractor fights

Catering supply staff working for DHL on Avanti West Coast struck over pay from 5-6 July. DHL had refused to even offer a pay rise, claiming poverty despite being part of a global business worth £81 billion.

There have been several bouts of action by outsourced rail workers over the last two years, including strikes by cleaners on multiple TOC contracts; protests by London Underground track protection workers; and strikes by cleaners and security staff on the Docklands Light Railway.

RMT needs an integrated national strategy for outsourced workers' fights. It could organise a special national conference of outsourced workers as an adjunct of its Industrial Organising Conferences to discuss joint campaigning.

Pay win on Eurostar

RMT members on Eurostar have secured a pay rise of between 8 and 17% for directly-employed staff. The deal includes a flat-rate minimum rise of £4,300, so lower-paid workers' pay will rise by a greater percentage.

The deal also includes increasing the amount of maternity leave paid at 100% salary.

The devil is often in the detail with pay settlements, and there may be some snags or drawbacks. But the £4,300 minimum rise is worth celebrating.

With pay an ongoing element in the national dispute on TOCs, and talks ongoing on London Underground Ltd., there is no reason for any of us to settle for less!

Mitie security fight

Eurostar's security staff, employed by contractor Mitie, are voting for strikes to win the reinstatement of an unfairly sacked workmate. The ballot runs from 11 July to 1 August.

They have also rejected the employer's pay offer. Out-sourced workers, often the lowest-paid in any train company, deserve the same as Eurostar's own staff.

Mitie's report for the 2022/3 financial year showed a record turnover of £4 billion, up 58% since 2021/22.

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Off The Rails' blog: up-to-date reports + views on union issues.

off the rails

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