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a platform for rank-and-file rail workers

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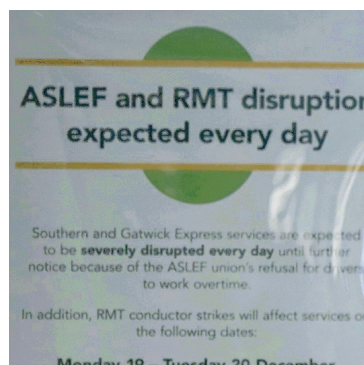
January 2018



## An open letter to fellow ASLEF drivers: WHICH SIDE ARE WE ON?

**“It has long been the tradition in ASLEF to respect picket lines whether they are our own or those of fellow trade unionists.” - ASLEF members’ diary**

**TIME TO MAKE THIS A REALITY!**



Dear Driver,

I am writing to you, as a fellow ASLEF driver, because I want to persuade you that we need to change how we approach the current RMT disputes over DOO/DCO.

We may, most of us, be in a separate union, but I believe that our interests in this matter

are bound up with those of the guards. If we allow them and their union to be defeated, will we soon have to work Driver-Only trains. ASLEF policy may firmly be against DOO on paper, and our leaders may have assured us that we will be in dispute if any TOC dares to formally table DOO/DCO for negotiation, but you only have to look to Southern to realise that even if that time comes, it doesn't necessarily end well for drivers. The deal struck to end ASLEF's dispute on Southern is, by our leaders' own admission, not the deal they wanted, nor is it an acceptable model for the rest of the industry. It is more or less an open secret that ASLEF leaders were desperate to settle with Southern to avoid around £500k in court costs and an ongoing Supreme Court case.

The leaders of our union have had their fingers badly burned by the court cases brought against us over the Southern disputes, and as a result they are taking a conservative stance on other TOCs. Our employers are using that very much to their advantage by avoiding tabling the subject in any dealings with ASLEF, while giving RMT the runaround in sham “talks” and aiming to grind them down over multiple strike days in a long dispute.

I am addressing this letter to the majority of drivers, who know that DOO is unsafe, is bad news for drivers and the public, and who do not want to see their colleagues' jobs devalued or wiped out.

[What this situation needs is for us to stop crossing picket lines.](#)

I want address some of the commons arguments against this that I've heard or read since all this started:

### 1. “It’s not our fight”

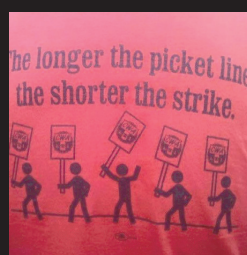
Both RMT and ASLEF as organisations are against DOO/DCO. If there's a fight against the practice, it's our fight too. This is just an excuse that stems from ASLEF's current position in law in relation to the dispute, but Margaret Thatcher's anti-union laws do not override what is right and wrong. If DOO is wrong, fighting it is right, and undermining any such fight must surely be wrong. When we cross those picket lines, come into work and drive trains around with scab “guards” on the back, we are undermining that fight.

### 2. “When ASLEF calls me out on strike, I'll strike”

ASLEF may never call us out on strike. The TOCs and the Department for Transport know what they are doing: if the RMT is broken and forced to settle before they have to trigger disputes with us, it will be much harder for us to justify what appears to be a fight “for another grade's jobs” when they themselves seem to have been beaten. The solid public support for keeping guards on trains will not directly carry over to us if the fight is already considered to have been lost, and in the wake of the Southern deal it will be far easier for the anti-union press to spin our dispute as being purely over money. We could find ourselves in a situation where it is too late.

### 3. “RMT have triggered these disputes too soon”

ASLEF drivers are entitled to their opinions about RMT's tactics and strategy. But solidarity is not conditional on agreeing with every aspect of another union's approach. *(continued overleaf)*



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Off The Rails is a platform for rank and-file railworkers, published by the socialist group Workers' Liberty. For more information, email

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Personally I believe RMT has made mistakes in the disputes, but this doesn't change the basic facts: a group of fellow workers is in struggle, in our workplaces, over an issue that profoundly affects us too. Solidarity is a trade-union principle.

#### 4. "The RMT haven't even stopped Rest Day Working, it's rubbish, why should we support them?"

See point 3. We cannot control another union's tactical decisions, we can only control what WE do.

#### 5. "I hate the RMT because of X, why should I support them?"

This is not about factional squabbles between ASLEF and RMT or the fallings-out between the leaderships of the two unions, this is about keeping guards on trains. The Tory government, via the TOCs, is trying to break the guards as a grade by removing their safety-critical status and thus stripping their union of its industrial power. How many of us have family or friends in the guard's grade? This is about our partners, parents, children, friends, drinking buddies. This is about the people that work alongside us and that we rely on when the job goes belly up. They are part of our class. The different badges we wear are insignificant compared to that.

#### 6. "ASLEF's advice is to work as normal."

Which advice? The union issues advice to all its members on their rights if asked to respect a picket line by members of another union. It's on a page in the ASLEF diary headed "Picket Lines". It's in there every year. It says: "It has long been the tradition in ASLEF to respect picket lines whether they are our own or those of fellow trade unionists." This is a core value of the union to which we all signed up and pay subs.

The union also issues circulars to branches advising members to work normally. It does this to protect its legal position in the event that its members do choose not to cross picket lines. Looking at the situation on Merseyrail, this circular is the reason ASLEF hasn't been dragged into court over the fact that its members aren't coming in to work.

I've even seen reps trotting out this line, without reference to our rights as individual workers as spelled out to us in the diary.

### Proper pickets preferable

As we all know, there are picket lines, and there are picket lines. A group of strikers shuffling nervously in a huddle, away from the actual entrances to stations or depots, isn't likely to have much impact.

Where picket lines are most successful is when they're lively, assertive, and mounted at the points where workers actually go into work. This allows pickets to have a conversation with workers coming in, and potentially turn them around.

At depots with multiple entrances and potential booking-on points, this might require some creative picketing, but it can be done.

Strikers shouldn't be cowed by the anti-union laws. One "picket supervisor" can supervise multiple picket lines as long as they can access them in reasonable time.

**The longer the picket line, the shorter the strike!**

## Merseyrail: spread the solidarity!



On Merseyrail, nearly 100% of ASLEF drivers have respected RMT picket lines. We need to make this the rule rather than the exception.

Trade unionists there have worked hard to build up a culture of solidarity in the depots, persuading ASLEF drivers that, even though the fight against DOO wasn't formally an ASLEF dispute, all workers had a shared interest in winning it.

Merseyrail drivers have put that assessment into action by refusing to cross picket lines. As noted elsewhere in this leaflet, no driver has been disciplined for this.

**We need to spread the solidarity.**

The reason for this is clear - they don't want to respect the lines and they don't want their members to either. This is not principled trade unionism or a good example to set for the members they represent; but it doesn't change our rights.

So which advice do you prefer? You can choose according to your conscience as others will choose according to theirs, but let there be no doubt that it is a choice.

#### 7. "I'm worried I'll be disciplined"

No ASLEF member has been disciplined anywhere in the country for refusing to cross a picket line in any of these disputes.

The TOCs do not want a dispute with ASLEF, which they would surely get if they tried to do discipline our members. Arriva Rail North even gave the union an explicit undertaking that none of its members would be disciplined for refusing to cross. Our union will protect us - that's what it's there to do.

The arguments about basic solidarity and respect for picket lines are hard to win these days but it was on the basis of these principles that the labour movement of the twentieth century won all its major victories - the rights at work we take for granted today. Those principles are what will win this dispute. Those principles are what the Tory anti-union laws sought to destroy.

I've seen various stories about some of these issues on social media dismissed by ASLEF activists as "anti-ASLEF propaganda". I am not anti-ASLEF, I have no intention of leaving the union. I just want us to change course.

We have a choice. On strike days, we can do one of two things: turn back at the picket line or cross and report for duty, working trains with scabs (some of whom are being paid handsome bonuses for their dirty work) and undermining our fellow workers the guards and the fight against DOO. That is the inescapable reality.

## The fundamental question is: which side are we on?