“Vertical Integration” means cuts: fight to defend jobs!

WE NEED A PUBLICLY-OWNED, DEMOCRATICALLY-RUN RAILWAY!

Inside: Why we need a publicly-owned railway; East Midlands Trains latest; Cleaners’ fightback spreads; South West Trains; Crossrail electricians’ fight; Marxism at work: what is a “living wage”; Peter Pinkney wins RMT president; more!
The privatisation of our railway system has cost us vast amounts of money. The taxpayer bill for the latest franchise debacle (see page 14) is expected to run to £50 million.

More money (almost twice as much, in fact) is spent on the railways now than when they were privatised in 1996, but the beneficiaries of that spending are TOC bosses rather than rail workers or passengers.

The McNulty Report will exacerbate all the worst aspects of privatisation. He wants the railways industry to “overcome its aversion to risk”, meaning more cut corners, more jobs lost, and more chances taken with workers’ and passengers’ safety! All so the government can reduce public subsidy and increase profits for private companies.

A privatised railway means subjecting what should be an integrated public service to the chaos of the market. It’s a nightmare for passengers, with different fare regimes applying across different TOCs and certain tickets only being valid on certain trains, even between the same cities or stations. And it’s a nightmare for workers, with our jobs, terms, and conditions in a state of increasing instability.

Our alternative to the chaos of a privatised railway is not simply state ownership. It’s true that a renationalised railway – even under a capitalist government – would be a huge step forward. It would increase the potential for democratic control and accountability over the railway system and give workers a central employer to bargain with. But how positive state ownership is for workers and service users depends very much on the type of state doing the owning!

We want a publicly-owned, democratically-run railway. That means the service being planned and run by elected councils of workers’ and passengers’ representatives, not controlled by unaccountable government bureaucrats. That way, the railways can be run in the interests of social need.

We should demand that the Labour Party – to which two of the three main rail workers’ unions are affiliated – commits to renationalising the railways if it wins the next elections.

But we should also fight for a much more ambitious idea – a workers’ government: a government that serves our class as the current government serves the rich. That means having a workers’ plan for remodelling society to serve the working-class majority, and not the fatcats at the top of TOCs.

We’re a long way off from winning that, but daring campaigns for elements of that workers’ plan - such as a cross-union fight for a publicly-owned, democratically run railway - can help our movement build up the confidence necessary to stop bartering for a bigger slice of the pie and take over the whole bakery instead!
An East Midlands trains driver reports on the latest from his workplace, following the recent pensions dispute.

The recently released interim valuation of the EMT pension fund says that as of Dec 2011 our section was down to a level of 90.2% funding; by comparison it was 99.9% in Dec 2010.

Workers in the fund are rightly angered by this, none more so than train drivers who took 6 days of strike action in the summer to prevent management reducing our contributions because we thought this valuation would reveal a deficit. This is all the more galling for us because we weren’t beaten on this until our own union leadership stabbed us in the back.

Following this self-inflicted defeat some disgusted members have left the union with one or two joining the right-wing breakway “Associated Train Crew Union” (ACTU). This division just helps management and it will be interesting to see how ATCU now deal with one of their drivers losing his job. The right thing to do would be for ASLEF to give what support they can but it could be difficult to convince those who have stuck by the union in the aftermath of the dispute. For those who have left simply writing to HO asking for a written explanation of why the negotiating team didn’t consult us on the laughable pension deal might not satisfy the desire to poke the ASLEF leadership in the eye with a sharp stick but when we get to the bottom of this it might be time to no confidence some leaders and replace them in subsequent elections.

Meanwhile station staff, senior conductors and train managers are slowly gearing up for a dispute over self-dispatch. These staff are well aware of the company’s efforts to reduce staff numbers and skills in compliance with the McNulty report. You only have to check out the continual daily emails from control telling us to be prepared to self-dispatch from a variety of locations where self-dispatch is not agreed because there are no staff available at stations.

The recent RAIB report into the fatal accident at James Street in Liverpool should lend this further urgency.
The McNulty report recommends greater “vertical integration” of Train Operating Companies and Network Rail in order to improve performance and drive down costs.

The stated reason for this is that it will end the culture of haggling over delay minutes and lead to a cooperative approach to running the railway. In reality it is the starting gun for the race to the bottom in quality of service and terms of employment.

Vertical integration is being trialled between Southwest Trains and Network Rail on the Wessex route – the so-called “Southwestern Railway” deep alliance. This exists only as a branding exercise so far, not as a legal entity. It has failed to deliver any performance improvements for passengers, but then that was hardly the point. The entire drive of the McNulty report on this question is to ensure greater control over infrastructure and terms of franchising by TOCs, in order to cut costs and deliver greater profits for themselves.

The long term plan sanctioned by McNulty is to have longer franchises with looser regulation by government. At present franchises are awarded on the basis of a series of terms and conditions, e.g. which lines are to be served and how often, which stations and ticket offices are to be staffed and for what hours, etc. McNulty suggests these terms should be relaxed in order, for example, to allow TOCs more leeway to decide which lines are most profitable to run trains on. The report even suggests that franchising should change so government would set out a level of financing and TOCs would put forward bids detailing a level of service they feel able to run based on that amount of money. As McNulty aims for a cost reduction of 30% the reduction in level of service would presumably be significant. The current program of deep alliances is part of this process of further cutting up the railways and transferring them into private control. All major decisions about the way our railways are run will become driven by profit.

Network Rail is a far from perfect institution but it remains the last nationally owned, state controlled, section of the national rail network. McNulty signals the sell-off of even that, and perhaps a return to the pre-nationalisation days of the “Big Four”, when the rail network was divided up and controlled entirely for profit by a small number of companies. Terms and conditions for staff on Network Rail are currently subject to national bargaining, which is not true for staff on TOCs. If Network Rail ends up being brought in house by the TOCs then national bargaining will be done away with and terms and conditions will suffer.

The “Southwestern Railway” already shows the sort of problems that would arise operationally from further private sector control of the railway infrastructure. The 4am Guildford to Waterloo train, formerly a staff train and still
used primarily for staff travelling to London depots for early shifts, has been pushed back by half an hour so that it no longer causes problems for Network Rail when they are unable to complete overnight engineering works on time. Network Rail currently have to pay fines to TOCs if over-running possession causes delays to trains. Rather than employ more staff to help get the work done on time the alliance has simply decided to re-time the affected train, with little regard to the staff or passengers who rely on it.

The implications of alliances like this for Freight are also obviously huge. With route control and signalling all under the same roof with the TOCs there will be no incentive at all to make sure Freight gets where it needs to on time – after all it is not the TOC that will lose out if Freight is delayed. This is combined with McNulty's recommendations that Freight be largely restricted to existing passenger routes to avoid the cost of maintaining dedicated track for it. Altogether it will ensure that the railways will become a very unreliable way to transport goods.

A related problem is the issue of access by one TOC on routes controlled by another. The nature of the railway is that lines currently run by different companies intersect and overlap for large portions of the network. If infrastructure is controlled by one train operator on a particular route what incentive will they have to allow access to their network by other operators? McNulty states such access should be protected, but he is vague on how this will be accomplished. There is little benefit to an operator taking on a franchise if other companies are guaranteed access to their network and can cherry pick the most profitable routes to run trains on. The incentive will always be for the alliance to maintain a high level of access charges, which will in all likelihood force other TOCs to abandon intersecting and overlapping lines. This will make the British rail network as a whole more fragmentary and far less easy to navigate for passengers, as well as costing jobs.

Finally McNulty is at pains to point out that deep alliance between TOCs and Network Rail will only involve infrastructure management (i.e. signalling and route control), not infrastructure ownership (i.e. the actual upkeep of the track). After all, while there are many reasons TOCs would want to grab control of signalling with both hands they would have little interest in being responsible for the messy and expensive business of maintaining the network. There is not much

Continued on page 6
profit to be made in track repair and these new type of long term franchises must be designed in such a way as to be financially attractive to big money corporate bidders like Stagecoach, First Group, and Virgin.

However, there are huge safety implications in separating out the upkeep of the network from the routine train operation and control. Such a separation was initially key to the relationship between maintenance contractors and Railtrack in the first years of privatisation. It meant that Railtrack had little interest in the effective upkeep of the network, and couldn’t enforce such upkeep even when it did. The result was the Hatfield derailment, in which four people were killed, and the following chaos as hundreds of 20mph speed limits were applied throughout the network because Railtrack had no real idea which sections of its track were safe and which were not. McNulty actually mentions Hatfield specifically in his report, but only to say that the safety procedures adopted in its aftermath should be “revised”. This couples ominously with his suggestion that the railway as an industry is too “risk-averse”.

Up to now the TOCs have really been leasing our railways for their own gain. McNulty signals a change, and it is a change the big private transport companies have been wanting for a while. They would no longer lease sections of our railways for short periods but instead take complete control of them for longer and longer periods of time.

We will lose this precious collective asset and if we ever get it back it will be in a far worse condition.

Lines will close, jobs will go, freight will be driven almost exclusively on to the roads, safety standards will fall, people will die. Brian Souter, Tim O’Toole, and Richard Branson will make a killing.

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**Wot, no hat?**

**A SouthWest Trains guard from Waterloo reports on some winter uniform fun and games with management...**

Waterloo platform staff on Southwest Trains are being told by managers that they are not allowed to wear hats unless the temperature falls below -2. This despite the fact that they are issued with hats as part of their uniform. No changes to uniform standard have been suggested by the company, this is purely an attempt by local managers to bully, intimidate, and humiliate their staff.

Managers are claiming that staff cannot have their hearing obstructed when conducting platform duties. However, does this mean that the hats the company have issued are a safety risk? If so, why exactly are they only a safety risk when the temperature is above -2? Management want to control every little detail of how we do our job, to make sure we always know exactly who is in charge. The RMT is taking up the issue, and Waterloo management may soon find they don’t quite have as much power over their staff as they thought.
Crossrail sparks

Crossrail is Europe’s biggest construction project, and one of the most significant transport construction projects in the world. With a projected cost of nearly £16 billion, huge amounts of money are being spent on a project that will significantly change transport through London.

But huge projects like this don’t just fall out of the sky. They get built because workers’ labour power and skills are used to build them. And, once they’re built, workers’ labour power and skills makes them run. That means that, even while it’s under construction, Crossrail is the workplace for hundreds of workers. And there have been significant struggles.

In September 2012, 28 sparks (electricians) were dismissed from the Westbourne Park Crossrail site when their contract was terminated earlier than expected. This just happened to coincide with them electing a new shop steward and health and safety rep, who had begun to raise concerns with management about the safety culture on the site.

The safety abuses are truly staggering; they include the overcrowding of a tunnel boring machine, which was used by 29 workers even though its rescue chamber (where workers can stay safe and breathe in the event of a tunnel collapse) only has capacity for 20. The union reps also witnessed and photographed live high-voltage cabling (1,100v) having wooden plans and other debris thrown on top of it.

Soon after the workers were dismissed, a gantry collapsed. Then, even more tragically, a worker on a Crossrail site in Holborn was electrocuted. Crossrail bosses and their subcontractors’ flagrant disregard for safety was highlighted yet again. Many workers suspect BFK, the main contractor, of deliberately targeting Frank and Rodney (the union reps). Frank has been the victim of anti-union blacklisting in the past when he worked on the Olympic construction site.

Since the sackings, workers and supporters have maintained a high profile campaign of direct action, including regular pickets at Crossrail sites and an occupation of the Office of Rail Regulation. Main contractor BFK has offered to rehire all the electricians, except the two union reps, making their union-busting intentions clear.

The campaign is continuing. The only way to stop similar safety abuses in future is to build strong organisation on railway construction sites.

Directly-employed railway workers should make sure we work with any unions organising on construction sites to help workers organise.
In the last _Off The Rails_, we reported on the developing struggles by Tube, DLR, and other cleaning workers across the railway and wider transport industry. Since then, the cleaners’ fightback has expanded into a cross-industry revolt of some of the lowest-paid workers in British economy.

Despite facing poverty wages and routine bullying and harassment from bosses, cleaning workers have taken inspiring action to win living wages, equal pension and travel pass rights, sick pay, and basic respect and dignity at work.

On 2 November, cleaners across four different contracts struck together. On 1 and 2 December, cleaners from another two contracts joined them, in the widest coordination of cleaners’ strike action in labour movement history. ISS cleaners on London Underground, London Midland, and East Coast mainline, Churchill cleaners on Tyne & Wear Metro, and Carlisle cleaners on First TransPennine Express and DLR have all been involved in the strikes. _Off The Rails_ has consistently argued for a coordinated national strategy for cleaners, and the national strike was a hugely important step forward. A lobby of Parliament was held on 11 December, and more action is planned for 2013.

_Off The Rails_ believes this coordination must continue. We also think the following principles will be crucial to ongoing cleaners’ fights:

**Industrial unionism:** other grades supporting cleaners’ struggles is not about “strong” workers helping “weak” ones. It’s about recognising our common interests as railway workers and working together. Cleaners are just as much a part of the railway industry as drivers, signallers, guards, engineers, or other workers. Our unions should organise industrially and involve cleaners as much as any other grade.

**Self-organisation and rank-and-file control:** All-grades unity doesn’t mean drivers telling cleaners what to do. Cleaners themselves must be in control of their own struggles, through democratically elected strike committees.

**Organise, organise, organise:** We need to start getting round workplaces and recruiting cleaners, using multi-lingual material where necessary. RMT offers reduced-rate subscriptions of £1 per week as part of campaigns to achieve union recognition. Unions must identify, train, support, and defend cleaners’ representatives, and train branches to involve cleaners alongside the grades already involved.

**Protest and political campaigning:** We need regular protests targeting TOCs, cleaning companies, and political decision-makers. In the case of London Underground, DLR, and Tyne & Wear Metro, the ultimate
employer/contractor is a local government body. Campaigning has forced Transport for London (in 2008) and Newcastle Council (2012) to endorse the Living Wage, which boosts cleaners’ pay once contracts are renewed.

The ability of the trade union movement to mobilise and win for super-exploited cleaners is a measure of our ability to carry out our most basic task of advancing working-class interests.

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Voices from the picket line

“ We haven't had a pay rise in 11 years. 90% of the staff don't get sick pay or London weighting. We don't get travel allowance or a pension fund; we get £6.19 an hour, and that's it. All we've had in the last 11 years is what we've got through the government's minimum wage increases, which amounts to about 60p [...] We're going to end up hungry and homeless if things carry on like this. We're really struggling, we can't pay our rents, we've got families to support, bills are going up, but our wages are going down. It can't carry on. That's why we're on strike today.” - Phil, ISS East Coast Cleaner

“ We're on strike for a pay increase and for better terms and conditions, for sick pay and enhancements for weekends, night work and bank holidays. Basic rights, really, for workers. We also don't get free travel like others. Our dispute is with the people who directly employ us firstly but with the train companies as well because they're doing things on the cheap.” - Kate, Carlisle First TransPennine Express cleaner

Rail cleaners are not fighting alone. Cleaners have also fought back at: University of London * John Lewis stores * Tower of London * Barbican concert venue * British Museum * British Medical Association HQ * BBC

Off The Rails supporters, including cleaning workers, are trying to initiate a cross-industry cleaners’ coordination to help link the fights.

For more information and updates, see www.workersliberty.org
By a London Underground worker

The Government intends to extend Smartcard ticketing, similar to London’s Oystercard, across the national rail network.

It is developing ITSO technology, already used on Southern and Southwest Trains, for nationwide use “as soon as technology permits”.

Government sees the Smartcard as a cost-saver and promotes this as a major policy plank in its “Rail Fares and Ticketing Review”, published March 2012.

The report emphasises key benefits for the Government:

1. Reducing costs through “less person to person transactions” i.e. reducing ticket selling jobs.

2. Using Smartcards to offer incentives to people who commute outside peak hours, an alternative to government investment in more and larger trains to expand peak capacity.

Smartcards are the Government's chosen tool for managing demand and avoiding investment.

The government maintains its commitment to “reducing and abolishing above inflation fare rises” But it qualifies this by saying “once savings are found” and “while minimizing public subsidy for rail”. In other words, rail fares will only be reduced through the job losses and cuts recommended by the McMulty Report, instead of public investment.

As well as benefiting the Government, Smartcard technology benefits the privateers. Transport Minister Norman Baker said in September, “we've got train operating companies knocking on our doors to get ticket offices closed”. This a case of policy being introduced at the behest and request of private companies seeking to profit from the industry.

In addition, Transport for London is going one step further by replacing the Oystercard with “wave and pay”, where payments will be deducted from a contactless bank card.

London Underground wants a cashless and staffless system: no need for staff to top up Oysters or service ticket machines.

Especially worrying is that the London Assembly found TfL's business case for wave and pay to be weak. They highlighted the decision makers' “lack of independence from the project sponsors”, i.e. concluding that TfL is in cahoots with the banks!

A pattern is forming here. Government, privateers and financial institutions conspiring to use technology to yield profit at the expense of jobs and public service.

Technology could and should be used to complement our jobs and improve services. But that would contradict the profit motive which dominates the rail industry.

Over the next year, attacks on ticket office jobs will intensify, in line with attacks across our industry.

We will have to couple our fight to defend ticket office jobs with the fight for public transport, run in the interests of workers and passengers, instead of profiteers.
By a new driver

I took a job as a trainee driver at a passenger TOC this autumn, having never worked in the rail industry before.

I’m about 11 weeks in, just completing a second week of front end turns - where you sit in the front cab with a driver while in service, watching the railway and the signalling go by and watching his/her driving and asking questions (or chatting about beer and slagging off management).

Before I got the job I had to complete a long competency-based online application, an online concentration test, attend an interview with company managers and get through a day of aptitude testing. Even once you’ve passed all that, it can be a tough slog as a trainee driver – 16 weeks of mainly classroom-based theory training, to learn and embed everything you need to know – Personal Track Safety, core traction, depot driving, signalling, speeds, defective on-train equipment, AWS/TPWS, passing signals at danger, assistance, propelling, emergency protection… the list seems almost endless.

Following this, you have another 16 weeks minimum to cover other types of traction and learning of the core route, as well as a minimum of 50 turns of duty with a minder, driving trains in service under his/her supervision. Along the way, your knowledge and skill levels are regularly assessed, usually by a manager on a one-to-one basis, which is stressful and can also be intimidating.

On top of all of the above, I’ve had to move house and downsize in order to manage on a poor training salary – about £10k less than in my previous job. This might be less frustrating if I knew I could expect a full driver’s wage at the point that I am signed off as a competent driver. However, it turns out that my union, ASLEF, negotiated a pay agreement with the company a couple of years ago that means that newly qualified drivers now have to work their way up to the full salary. So I now get to work for two years with the same levels of responsibility as other drivers but for around £10k per year less!

I am told that the union agreed to this as the deal provided a greater pay increase for existing drivers. This was not the kind of short-sighted trade unionism I expected to find in an industry with such a reputation for militancy. But once you get in, you quickly start to see that trade unionism on the railway is far from perfect. To an outsider, the idea that the driving grade should have its own union, with another one for guards/conductors and all other staff is just plain daft – why on earth don’t we just have one union for the whole rail industry?

Add to that the widespread casual sexism and racism (and other isms) in mess rooms, training rooms and on the job and it’s clear that there is much work still to be done!
Rail cleaners have recently taken strike action to win living wages (see pages 8-9). Their struggle can be a beacon to the millions of other low-paid workers in Britain.

New research shows that 1 in 5 workers earn less than a living wage. 24% of workers in Northern Ireland, and 23% in Wales, earn less than a living wage. 90% of bar staff and 85% of restaurant waiting staff earn less than a living wage, as do nearly 800,000 retail workers. As these are the jobs where many young people and working students are able to find work, young workers are overwhelmingly faced with poverty pay.

Capitalism needs to keep workers going. If we are too sick to keep turning up to work every day, capitalists can’t make profits. As Karl Marx puts it in Capital: “The maintenance and reproduction of the working class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital.”

But our bosses just need to keep us going — and that’s it. If they can get away with it, they will screw down our wages to the bare minimum necessary to keep us fit and healthy enough to return to work every day. In other words: “The capitalist may safely leave [reproduction] to the labourer’s instincts of self-preservation and of propagation. All the capitalist cares for, is to reduce the labourer’s individual consumption as far as possible to what is strictly necessary.”

The minimum wage, introduced by the Labour government in 1998, meant that employers weren’t able to reduce wages below a certain amount. It was a step forward, but there is a huge gap between the minimum wage — the government-arbitrated minimum necessary to “reproduce” our labour from one day to the next — and a wage on which it is possible to live a decent standard of life, including spending on housing, transport, clothing, and leisure. The labour movement has traditionally counterposed the idea of a “living wage” — a wage on which workers can not simply scrape by, but live a decent life.

The latest research uses £7.20 (outside of London) and £8.55 (London) as its “living wage” figures. They are calculated based on cost-of-living assessments of expenses like housing and transport. But these are conservative figures. It is not much easier to support a family on £7.20 than it is on £6.19 (the current minimum wage rate), especially if you work in an industry or sector where your hours vary from week to week, as many low-paid workers do.

Research conducted by trade unions suggests that a real “living wage” figure is
closer to £10 per hour. Taken at that level, the number of workers paid less than a living wage is vastly higher.

The low pay crisis is fed into by growing underemployment — workers who work fewer hours a week than they want. An Office of National Statistics report shows that over three million workers would work more hours each week if they were available.

Low-paid workers, such as cleaners at John Lewis and the Société Générale bank, have faced unilateral cuts in their hours, meaning they are expected to complete the same amount of work, for the same below-living-wage rates of pay, in a smaller amount of time.

Despite facing poverty pay, cuts to hours, and rising living costs, those workers have organised inspiring fightbacks. John Lewis cleaners won pay increases and a commitment from management to negotiate towards a living wage, and cleaners in a variety of other industries have launched strikes and direct-action campaigns. Low-paid workers in other sectors — such as parking attendants at Camden council — have also built strike campaigns, recently voting for a five-day strike and, if that fails to yield results, to move to an all-out indefinite strike to win living wage.

KPMG are attempting to promote a “business case” for the living wage, and building a bourgeois political consensus around it which now includes the Labour leadership and even senior Tories like Boris Johnson (whose Greater London Assembly endorses the principle of the London Living Wage). The “business case” for living wages is of no concern to us, or only of concern to the extent that it is a reflection of working-class social pressure.

For us, the living wage is not a matter of economics or of figures. It is a matter of political principle. Every penny we force bosses to pay us above the basic minimum they think they can get away with is a small blow for the hegemony of our interests against the hegemony of theirs.

Enforcing the social principle of living wages would, like the Factories Acts of the 1840s and 1850s which introduced the eight-hour day, or the creation of the National Health Service, represent what Marx called “the victory of a principle”, a victory of “the political economy of labour over the political economy of property”.
The Laidlaw report into what went wrong during the West Coast franchising deal has just been published. This will be followed by the Brown report into how the DfT can make the franchising process better. Like the McNulty report before it Brown’s report will not look at the possibility of renationalisation. In both cases it seems that ideology triumphs over good sense. In this era of austerity the Tories remain committed to spending as much as it takes to maintain the pretence that franchising works with only minor changes needed to tweak the system.

Franchising on the railway was introduced to give some credence to the supposed benefits of privatising it. Having realised that you couldn’t actually run competing services over the network franchising was introduced as the makeshift mechanism whereby the supposed benefits of a contrived private competition could be proved. In granting Virgin Trains a management contract, not a franchise, to run the West Coast mainline until November 2014 the government has ironically proved the point that franchising doesn’t work: if it did Virgin should have had to take part in another round of bidding for a short term franchise. Commenting on the deal ASLEF’s Mick Whelan rightly says “They [Virgin] bear no risk whatsoever over the course of the 23 month franchise [sic] and the taxpayer will underwrite the services they provide whether revenues go up or down. This decision again demonstrates that rail franchising delivers good value for private train operators but not passengers and taxpayers.”

In the meantime the DfT has “paused” its three outstanding rail franchise competitions - Great Western, Essex Thameside and Thameslink - pending the outcome of Brown’s review. If he does make anything more than minor changes to the process then it is possible that the bidding might have to go back to day 1 with the DfT having to reimburse costs to all the bidders. This will be on top of what RMT predicts to be at least a £100 million bill to taxpayers comprised of £40 million to the failed West Coast bidders, nearly £9 million paid out in investigating what went wrong with the tendering process and the rest coming from a loss of projected Government revenues from the short-term Virgin fit-up and the costs associated with suspending the rest of the franchising timetable.

Alistair Darling (former Labour party transport secretary) has advised the current secretary Patrick McLoughlin to reduce the
length of the franchises because long ones make economic forecasting virtually impossible and thus increase the risk for the taxpayer. For their part potential bidders won’t want this because they prefer investment decisions to be made over as long a period as possible. As longer franchises were introduced by the Tories to benefit their business buddies it is difficult to see this happening even if Brown recommends it. He will probably opt for the status quo that favours the private operators.

While Darling is right on this he would also do well to remember that while transport secretary it was him that got rid of the Strategic Rail Authority. The failings at the DfT outlined in Laidlaw’s report, flawed and inconsistent methodology and breaking their own franchise competition rules were compounded by departmental cuts and weak leadership. As a first step to putting all this right it now seems right to raise the call for the creation of an arms-length organisation, like British Rail which was staffed by experienced railway managers to oversee the industry and not civil servants.

But as this smacks too much of renationalisation don’t hold your breadth.

* The author wishes to acknowledge the work of Christian Wolmar, which was useful in researching this article.

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Living rules ™ or Pass the Buck 2?

By a Network Rail worker

The latest edition of the game of ‘Pass the Buck’ has arrived just in time for your Christmas stocking.

Now called ‘11 lifesaving rules’ it dictates how many ways you can be sacked or disciplined while letting management off the hook.

It starts off quite simply by lulling you into a false sense of security by pretending that it is all about your safety but after a short period of time you start to notice that when you try to use these rules then whoever starts questioning the safety of a job is subsequently hauled in for an ‘informal’ interview or actually has disciplinary action started against them.

At the same time the ‘game’ discreetly changes long held assumptions about rules and regulations. Some are distorted while others are dispensed with by local managers, but the most intriguing thing is that you’re not told any of this until it crops up in the game play. Higher managers are given plausible deniability by saying one thing while knowing that lower managers are bullying staff to ignore safety.

Some will say that this is just a rehash of the previous edition out in time for the Christmas market but I think that it is a game changer in its own right and it will keep us entertained for years to come.

I give it 0 stars as it is too painful to play for any length of time.
Peter Pinkney elected!

In the last issue of Off The Rails (August/September 2012), we brought you an interview with Peter Pinkney, the Network Rail signaller standing for the RMT Presidency. We’re delighted to report that Peter was successful in his election bid.

Off The Rails supporters were closely involved in his campaign. Peter has been a close friend of Off The Rails, and our predecessor publications, down the years, and we want to extend our congratulations to him. But the hard work starts now. Electing a good candidate to a position at the top of the union can’t change things on its own. Peter’s election must be part of an ongoing campaign to transform the RMT to make it more democratic, more responsive to the needs of its members, more industrially combative, and more inclusive of all sections of the railway and transport workforce.

In an interview with Off The Rails before the election, Peter said: “The President is a key link between the union’s leadership and the workplaces our members are in […] My main campaign tenet is to maintain and strengthen that link, and make sure [members’] views are listened to and expressed at the level of the national union.”

Off The Rails hopes Peter’s presidency will be an opportunity to do just that, and make sure that the “distance” between the union and the workplace is reduced as much as possible. Peter’s victory opens up the potential for a greater rank-and-file voice in the direction of the RMT; let’s make that a reality!

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off the rails

- is a quarterly pamphlet, plus bulletins as needed for particular campaigns or disputes.
- is written by railway workers - all our reports are from the front line. Names are left off so that writers can tell their stories and express their views without fear of victimisation.
- is for all rail workers, whatever your grade, location or employer, whatever trade union you are in.
- aims to provide information to rail workers, support to our struggles, and a forum to discuss strategies.
- welcomes and will publish reports, comments and opinions from all rail workers.
- is fiercely pro-union, but is independent of the union head offices, so is not chauvinist about any particular union, and is free to criticise the unions’ leadership when we feel it is necessary.
- has a statement of aims called ‘Fantasy Union of Rail and Transport Workers’: get a copy when you subscribe.
- is published by the socialist group Workers’ Liberty, but aims to be a platform and an organising tool for all activists who share our basic outlook.
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