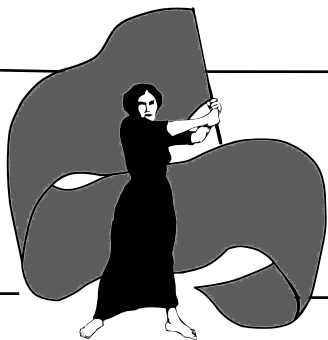




On Guard

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Poor Network Rail Offer accepted

This year's Network Rail pay deal with strings has been accepted by a slim majority, with 53% of the votes being cast in favour of the offer. It was sent out without a recommendation from the union leadership but the narrow margin in the referendum indicates that, with a recommendation to reject and an active campaign, the vote would almost certainly have gone the other way. The union has missed an opportunity to mobilise members in one of the largest and most strategically significant employers in the industry for a major battle.

Our goal now is not to let the same thing happen with the TOCs. We need a no strings above inflation pay rise this year, coordinated action across as many TOCs as possible and a union leadership that will campaign strongly against

any deal that does not meet those aspirations. Elsewhere in the public sector NHS workers and teachers have all been offered 2.8%. With inflation running around 3.5% that offer is a pay cut. RMT must unite our struggle with other public sector workers' unions and fight the Labour government for a real terms pay increase. In 2026 TOC and Network Rail workers should run a joint campaign for productivity free pay restoration.

Building a fight back requires branches and Regional Councils to call meetings to discuss campaigning, where members can talk about the kind of action we'll need to win. We need to shift from being reactive to employers' offers to a proactive, combative mode of organising that puts us on the front foot.

No To Benefit Cuts!

On 7 May, MPs discussed potential cuts to Personal Independence Payments at a Westminster Hall debate (a forum where government ministers are questioned). A number of MPs reported the situation of constituents who have approached them in fear of these cuts.

The MPs who spoke against cuts went beyond the

42 Labour MPs who last week signed a letter to Starmer pledging opposition and calling for a pause and change in direction. Danny Kruger, the Shadow Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, also spoke, to say that the Tories will be joining MPs opposing the changes on the grounds that this was a cut without any plan for reforming the

benefits system!

Labour has lost control of its narrative — increasingly it looks like the “nasty party”. Even if it manages to push through these cuts it could do itself irreparable and irreversible political damage. Time is short to get the government to either pause or change direction. We need to step up the pressure now.

We need to hammer home why benefit claims are rising. A recent report from the New Economics Foundation shows that the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis has hugely impacted on our health, especially our mental health. In addition, a rise in claims, over-and-above the rise in disability, is likely due to more people claiming the help they are entitled to who previously let it go because of the hassle.

Locally, the Sheffield Labour Against Benefit Cuts group have been campaigning to stop the cuts to PIP with a demo last Saturday (17th May). There is also a model motion to put to CLPs (<https://tinyurl.com/og-pipcuts>) to pressure MPs into rebelling. The partial U-turn on winter fuel payments shows that there is room to challenge this government and it is important that we do so.

The RMT has a parliamentary group of MPs and ASLEF is affiliated to the Labour Party. Our unions should be kicking over tables in the Labour Party and using all their weight in the structures to say: stop the benefit cuts - no to austerity - tax the rich, don't rob the poor!

Hull Trains dispute rumbles on

Aslef's dispute with Hull Trains has now escalated to indefinite strike, beginning on 31st March. The dispute is for the reinstatement of a driver who was fired for raising a safety concern. This dispute remains somewhat under-publicised within the national labour movement, despite its far-reaching significance.

The foremost reason this dispute should concern all trade unionists inside and outside the rail industry, is the importance of the principle that all workers, particularly those in dangerous industries like rail, should feel able to raise safety concerns with their employer without fear of victimisation. Failure to defend this principle trashes any semblance of "safety culture" and increases the risk to workers and passengers alike.

The other big reason that this dispute should concern everyone is that these days, indefinite strikes are rare - far rarer than they should be. It's important that where unions do stage such actions, they are shown ultimately to be successful.

Lastly, the calling of an indefinite strike builds on Aslef's recent tendency in some parts of the industry to call serious action relatively early in a strike campaign. This positive trend has so far seen big wins for the union at LNER — first against their proposed use of the Tory Minimum Service Levels legislation, then against their continued use of Managers on massive daily bonuses to drive trains on strike days, along with other abrogation

of agreements. This has been a positive direction for the union to move in, and trade unionists everywhere should care about encouraging it to continue, as it sets a good example to unions everywhere on what constitutes effective industrial action.

It's been some weeks now since the "indefinite strike" began, and what we are seeing is that ASLEF is in fact calling off many individual days of action at the shortest possible notice in order to provide the striking members with a sustainable level of pay rather than total loss of income, while inconveniencing Hull Trains as much as possible.

This has not yet forced HT back to the table, however, so it seems that further escalation is necessary.

We are not privy to any of the discussions among the HT members or the ASLEF leadership, but it seems obvious to us that the union should take steps to ensure strike pay is secured for these members and they are taken out on a genuine indefinite strike.

No to cleaners starting trains

Northern aspire to have cleaners, or cleaning supervisors, starting traction units on depot for the purpose of gaining access in order to clean them.

Aslef is rightly working against this, as is RMT. It would be a very negative development if the company were to succeed in introducing this.

Not only would it undermine the driver's job role and result in a

comparatively very underpaid grade of workers, given the extra responsibility this entails, but it also threatens safety.

Anyone with an understanding of the industry knows that the company is simply not going to train cleaners properly on the trains they are powering up, when that is all that they would be doing with them.

But underpaid, undertrained people starting units that could trigger emergency group calls, or even roll away in some circumstances, is a recipe for disaster.

If you are putting a key in a train, especially with the intention of leaving the cab or even the entire unit unattended, you need to know how and why this can be dangerous in some circumstances. Currently the only people who understand this are also the only people who are allowed to do it, and accidents still happen (see the rollaway on Platform 8 at Sheffield for a recent example).

Got a story you want to share? Write in! All contributions anonymous

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What is On Guard?

On Guard is a rank-and-file socialist bulletin, published regularly, written by rail workers, for rail workers, of all grades, and all unions. It is published by the socialist group Workers' Liberty, but is produced in editorial meetings open to all workers. Supporters from outside the rails can help with public distribution.
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