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Britain

The Rail Strikes Are Entirely Justified

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The biggest wave of strikes on Britain's rail network since 1989. That's what the UK faces this week as the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) stages three days of national action, plus a one-day shut down of the London Underground. [1]

As each strike encompasses a 24-hour period, overnight work won't take place either, meaning a later start and fewer services even on days when daytime staff are present. In short, Britain's railway network will either shut down, or be severely disrupted, for a week.

Britain's billionaire-owned papers and Partridge-esque TV hosts are depicting the strikes as selfish. [2] Yet what the RMT is demanding is the bare minimum for any union worth its salt. Alongside no compulsory redundancies – which is absolutely necessary if the government is serious about increasing passenger numbers – it's asking for an 11% pay increase. In other words, the RMT wants wages to keep up with inflation so workers don't become poorer in real terms.

This is all the more justified given that RMT members swallowed a pay freeze last year. According to the [union's calculations](#), a worker earning £35k has already lost spending power equivalent to £3,150. If there's another freeze for 2022, that will rise to £7,788.

The current cost of living crisis means we can expect [these kinds of setbacks](#) for workers across much of the wider economy. The difference is that in the rail industry, workers are sufficiently organised to push back. While this makes them a target for Britain's reactionary media, for the rest of us, they offer the template for a high wage economy.

With 2022 expected to see the biggest hit to living standards since 1956, it should come as no surprise that the RMT's response prefigures events elsewhere. From 20 June to 11 July, the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) will ballot more than 6,000 of its members at Network Rail. This comes after the union already announced strike ballots among members at Avanti West Coast, CrossCountry, East Midlands and West Midlands Trains. Meanwhile, members of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) are striking later this month at Hull Trains, Greater Anglia and Croydon Tramlink. [3]

The strength of feeling among ASLEF members, who have historically been more hesitant to strike, is no different to that of the RMT. Indeed, [99% of the union's members](#) on the Croydon Tramlink voted to strike next week, on a turnout of 86%. While politicians might lambast the 'militancy' of trade unions and their failure to reflect members' interests, not a single MP enjoys this level of democratic legitimacy.

While rail workers are expected to see the value of their wages fall by at least 10% this year, industry fat cats are rolling in it. The chief executive for Network Rail, Andrew Haines – who recently said the strikes would make a pay increase harder – earns more than £585k a year (before bonuses). Jeremy Westlake, the organisation's chief financial officer, earns £415k. Network Rail's seven managing and group directors each earn around £330k – roughly twice the prime minister's salary. Anit Chandarana, until last month Haines' chief of staff, made £160k – twice what Mick Lynch, the RMT general secretary, earns. Among all the anti-union slander, you will struggle to find this mentioned by The Sun, Times or Telegraph.

Private operators are no better. Patrick Verwer, boss of perennially crisis-stricken Southern Rail, [took home £482k](#) in 2019. Matthew Gregory, the CEO of First Group PLC which operates several lines across the UK, received [a basic](#)

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[salary of £635k in 2018](#), and can earn as much as £1m in additional bonuses. A private business can pay what it likes, you might say – but that fails to wash when firms are administering public services with taxpayer subsidies.

While demanding pay restraint and threatening job cuts, it's unclear what the government actually wants. Central to Tory plans for 'levelling up' at the last election were proposals to expand the rail network. Indeed, they even went as far as to claim they would "restore many of the Beeching lines". It's hard to reconcile opening services closed for 60 years with laying off staff.

Grant Shapps, the transport secretary, appeared to admit as much when he recently claimed that "unlike the past 25 years, when rising passenger demand year after year was taken for granted [...] today the railway is in a fight." With passenger numbers temporarily down, the government spies an opportunity to bully unions with diminished leverage. Yet when Shapps announced the creation of Great British Rail last year, he declared how "growing the network and getting more people travelling" was a "core aim".

And while passenger numbers are below their pre-Covid highs, they are recovering: the industry generated £5.9bn in ticket sales in the year to March – nearly three times that of the previous year. What's more, [statistics from the Department for Transport](#) show passenger numbers were 90% of pre-Covid levels by Thursday 19 May, rising to 92% over the following three days. If the Tories are actually serious about growing rail use, then even the work from home revolution shouldn't mean job cuts.

Real wages in the UK have been stagnant for more than a decade. Now, in the shadow of Covid and a spike in inflation following the war in Ukraine, this will only get worse. Anyone who wants Britain to become a high wage economy, values public services and wants to address the climate crisis should support these strikes. Industrial action is the step ladder to a more prosperous and equal society.

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[1] The three strike days Tuesday 21 (including the London tube), Thursday 23 and Saturday 25 June.

[2] Alan Partridge is a comedy TV character plating a parody of television presenters as a "tasteless and inept broadcaster with an inflated sense of celebrity".

[3] Other areas not yet affected by strike calls are standing in solidarity see ["We Don't Cross Picket Lines" – Rail Strike Interview With RMT Wales](#).