

Build on ScotRail win: Step up strikes!

ScotRail workers have seen off an attempt by their employer to attack working conditions, and have broken the pay freeze that the government and employers were determined to impose on us. But Scotrail workers will face new battles in the new year. It is essential that we build on the momentum of their success so far and spread strike action across the rail industry.

Also in Scotland, workers on Serco Caledonian Sleeper continue with strike action over horrendous conditions and behaviours coming from management. The ScotRail win may give them a boost — but it may leave them feeling isolated. If we all rally to support them, the Sleeper strikers can still win.

RMT will soon be balloting for strikes on Network Rail and on London Underground, where ASLEF has already returned an emphatic vote for action. Employers across the industry are planning to cut jobs and attack working conditions.

A co-ordinated fightback can stop them.



Scotrail pay deal: a rep writes

When its AGM accepted a drastically improved pay offer from ScotRail on the eve of COP26, it came as the first major victory for RMT's efforts to bust the rail industry pay freeze. With protracted late-stage negotiations between senior union officials and the Scottish government, it exposed the rotten corporatist husk beneath that thin veneer of working-class empathy which the SNP seems increasingly less able to maintain.

RMT submitted a pay claim in January 2020 and had been seeking talks since.

Covid-19 came as an opportunity for Abellio, anticipating a premature end

to its ailing franchise. It deferred pay talks on the basis of flatlining passenger numbers and revenue, proceeding to eat away at our terms and conditions, including an agreement on extra pay for rest day working, knowing that an industrial response was practically impossible in the pandemic shutdown.

As the infection rate soared and risk to

frontline workers grew, Abellio resisted changes to work practices and was slow to put safety measures in place outside central hub stations, while trying to browbeat staff to be thankful that due to government funding no-one had to be furloughed. The aim to keep services running for key workers gave way to trains and stations being flooded with young people, a rise in anti-social behaviour and limited police support. Customer-facing staff saw that the company was not prioritising their

protection, much less recognising their efforts through their pay packets.

The push for a wider pay settlement grew from solid action by conductors

and ticket examiners in their rest day working payment dispute. Sunday services had almost completely halted, a skeleton service in the central belt staffed by management 'volunteers'. Determination grew with strong results in the six-month reballots. The resolve of both Abellio and the Scottish government were impacted.



COP26 presented massive leverage. With much of the city centre road network closed to traffic, the crippling of the rail network would have huge implications for the efficacy of the conference. Rank-and-file ScotRail members saw this as the opportunity to secure a meaningful pay settlement, and voted to overcome anti-union laws and secure a strong mandate for industrial action. RMT called strikes covering the full 12 days of COP26.

As the clock ticked and the superficial efforts of Abellio to reach compromise floundered, Transport Scotland and the Scottish government were forced into an active role. Minister for Transport Graham Dey often appeared out of his depth. Industrial action would have been a massive embarrassment for Nicola Sturgeon's administration.

RMT members had put themselves in a position of power, and held firm against an offer which imposed detrimental productivity conditions in its second year and a percentage increment which would likely be much lower than the rate of inflation come April 2022.

RMT AGM received a 'final offer' from the employer: a two-year deal with numerous strings in year two, the 'price' for concessions in year one. ScotRail reps who were AGM delegates led the debate, making clear that the

offer was unacceptable. The AGM voted to reject it: strikes remained on.

The next day, the breakthrough offer came. It turned out the previous offer wasn't 'final' after all. The persistence of RMT negotiators and the resilience of the membership had won through. The entire second year of the deal, the hill on which Abellio and the Scottish Government had looked set to die, was removed, resulting in a one-year pay deal, extra payment for working during COP26 and a resolution to the rest day working dispute. AGM delegates voted to accept the offer, and this victory for worker power received wide acclaim by the wider trade union movement.

This success is not unqualified. The dropped efficiency and productivity will have to be dealt with head-on in coming months. Abellio and the Scottish government plan to 'stream-line' station staffing, de-specialise grades and dilute safety briefings. RMT will need to galvanise.

Nevertheless, few would contest that this outcome is a victory for organised labour, a staring-down of the Scottish government and a failed Abellio, and a testament to the resilience of RMT members in fighting on for something better while others settled for less.

more reps' comments overleaf ...

Reps' thoughts on ScotRail deal

“I think it's an acceptable offer. It's appalling that it took the threat of disruption during COP26 to get Abellio round the table, and a management-produced Q&A document urging workers to break a strike in return for a pay rise was shameful. Aside from a few colleagues who are entitled and have never really been pro-union, the workforce felt furious and disgusted that a director used our internal communications to praise workers for leaving RMT, claiming that it was not democratic to not offer a referendum on the first offer which was full of unacceptable strings.”

“I'm not sure the deal is wonderful. But all the extra conditions were removed so we were happy with 2.5% because it was never about the money – it was about ensuring that ticket examiners and conductors were not being used to put others out of work. They reinstated overtime payments for all grades not just drivers, so that put right the equality part of the issue.”

“The mandate was coming from the rank-and-file members. Our RMT Scotland women's page was inundated with very peed off women not happy with the former offers and asking what the picket lines would look like. They wanted to go all the way. Nearly 350 women, mostly ScotRail, were talking to reps for the first time, emailing their company council reps, and their male colleagues galvanising a really strong resolve. It was magic to be a part of it. The women were wonderful and deserve to be acknowledged.”

off the rails

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