

Train Drivers and Guards in the UK Unite Against Single Employee Crews

Towards the end of summer, operating crews at rail carrier Southern Rail in the south of England went out on strike over the question of train crew size. Their fight to preserve both the driver (engineer) and the guard (conductor) on each train – while different in a number of ways from the struggle being waged in the U.S. to preserve the two person operating crew – has many similarities as well. On both sides of the Atlantic, each craft has specific duties assigned to it, and each is essential for the safe and secure operation of the train. And each craft is represented largely by a separate and distinct union – the driver by the Associated Society of Engineers & Fireman (ASLEF) and the guard by the Rail, Marine & Transport Workers Union (RMT). In both the US and the UK, private for-profit corporations are demanding across the board staffing reductions, claiming that modern technology has rendered workers superfluous and unnecessary.

The two unions have balloted their members for strike action in defense of the two-person crew, and in the case of the RMT, have actually engaged in dramatic strike action. This battle is seen as crucial and will impact the path of the UK's railways for the foreseeable future. The rail unions (all unions in fact) are facing probably the biggest challenges that they've faced since the Thatcher era in the 1980s. With a very anti-union government in power and a Labour Party that currently seems more interested in fighting within itself than taking ground from the Tory (conservative) Party, the cards are undoubtedly stacked against the unions.

The guard (sometimes known as the Conductor, Senior Conductor or Train Manager, depending on which company employs them, but basically the same job where safety is concerned) is responsible for a wide range of duties. They are often seen as simply a customer service representative who opens and closes doors. In addition to the revenue protection and customer service duties however, the guard is in fact responsible for what we call the platform train interface (PTI); i.e. watching the passengers boarding and alighting the train to identify and deal with any incident such as a person falling down the gap, looking for and assisting passengers who have disabilities and ensuring that when the doors are closed and the train is departing there is nobody trapped in the doors that could be dragged along the platform - all things that are

better done by a person first standing on the platform and then watching out of the window from the train as it departs than by the driver in the cab using mirrors or monitors. The guard is trained and responsible for everything that the driver is responsible for in the event of an emergency where the driver becomes incapacitated. This could be stopping approaching trains after a derailment, dealing with a fire on board or a range of other emergency scenarios.

Southern Rail plans to abolish guards and introduce Driver Only Operated trains on nearly all their services through Surrey and Sussex. This is a threat to safety and security. If they get their way, up to 400 guards could lose jobs. Driver Only Operation means the driver will be the train's only guaranteed crewmember. Under this plan, the driver would be expected to drive the train *and* be responsible for passenger safety.

Currently, both the driver and the guard protect the safety of the train. Guards must be fully trained in operational safety and route knowledge, including being able to secure the doors safely, protecting the train and acting in emergencies such as derailments or fires. Independent inquiries after train crashes and fatalities have consistently said that on-board staff, trained in protection and evacuation procedure, are essential. If there is an accident, antisocial behavior, or even a terrorist attack, the guard can call for assistance and inform and reassure passengers.

The rail carrier states that advances in technology mean Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains are safe and have worked elsewhere. This is not dissimilar from what the major US rail corporations say now about Positive Train Control (PTC). GTR Southern is the largest private franchise in the UK raking in millions each year for its joint owners, Go-Ahead and Keolis. It is easy to see the analogy between the situation in the UK and the US.

Railroad Workers United has adopted a resolution of support for our brothers and sisters in the UK, members of ASLEF and the RMT, and pledge to support their struggle. We encourage the BLET and SMART-TD (UTU) leadership to take an interest in this fight and to likewise pledge solidarity with these fellow workers across the ocean. We have a lot to learn from their efforts AND their fight is our fight!
