

Letter from England: Train Drivers in the UK Today

Last year, a brother railroad worker from the United Kingdom made contact with Railroad Workers United. He ordered a T-shirt and signed up for our list serve, and then visited the United States this fall and met with RWU members. Below is a brief description of the working conditions and the issues facing rail labor — specifically engineers — in the UK today.

My name is Matt and I work as a train driver (locomotive engineer) in the UK. Although generally speaking I have found the railway to be much the same wherever I've been in the world in terms of its family-like atmosphere, well intended jokes and unique characters, I have come to realize that the types of railway we operate and conditions of employment are vastly different. I met railroad engineers in the U.S. recently and we talked of many of the differences, and so I appreciate being given this opportunity to write a bit about the rail network and our conditions at home.

The United Kingdom is only a small island but is blessed with the fastest growing railway in Europe, currently operating around 24,000 trains per day over 20,000 miles of track, catering for 1.3 billion passenger journeys and 105 million tons of freight traffic per year according to the most recent information available to me. A government owned organization operates and maintains the track, signaling and infrastructure, including around 32,000 bridges, tunnels and viaducts. All mainline train operating companies are privately owned - except for the most profitable one which is publicly owned after a series of failed private franchisees - but is soon to be sold off again into the financial black hole that is the privatized rail industry unless we can keep up the campaigning and reverse that decision. The rail operator in question is called East Coast, and operates over the predominantly 125mph railway from London Kings Cross to Edinburgh, Scotland, with limited services to Aberdeen and Inverness.

Rail staff haven't fared too badly out of privatization in any part of the industry, and thanks to the strength and ingenuity of our unions, we are now working for a salary and conditions appropriate to the specialist nature of the work. This is in comparison to the 1980's where staff relied heavily on overtime, extra shifts and enhancements just to make their pay livable. Drivers can generally expect to work a 35 - 37 hour week, usually averaged over a longer period (though we have not quite reached the union goal in any company yet — a 32 hour, 4 day week — so we have a little way to go. Some employers, including mine, operate a system of annualized hours where we are contracted to work a set number of hours in a year (1595 is very common but not exclusive) with every hour that is worked being deducted from that total. Upon completion of the hours it is the drivers' choice whether to take the remainder of the contract off and stay at home (continuing to receive their basic salary) or carry on working and have the excess hours paid in a lump sum at the end. In the event that there are hours remaining at the end of the contract they are written off with no penalty for the employee.

As a freight driver I can expect to receive a minimum of 12 hours' notice for a shift, though this is usually more, and can only be a shift starting within a 6 hour time period. If there are no jobs within that time period then they must give the day off (again with 12 hours' notice). A minimum rest period of 12

hours is compulsory between turns of duty, and we can never work more than 13 consecutive days. These are some of the recommendations that were implemented after the Clapham Junction Rail Disaster in 1988 where 35 people were killed and 484 injured. A major contributing factor in this tragic incident was fatigue through working excessive hours. My maximum scheduled day is 11 hours 30 minutes with no driving after the 11th hour although I can drive up to 12 hours at my own discretion in the event of delay. A 10 hour maximum day is more common on passenger operations. Salaries vary by company, with the lowest paid drivers receiving around £40,000 (approx. \$62,500) and the highest paid somewhere in the region of £57,000 (approx. \$89,000) per year for their basic pay before overtime.



American built Class 66 locomotive #66185 on a train at Elstow Sidings (Bedfordshire) waiting to back out onto the mainline with 42 empty wagons after delivering 1500 tonnes of road stone.

We are a heavily unionized industry, even though union membership is not compulsory. The majority of drivers are in the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), which is a craft union benefitting from a high membership density. I don't have an actual figure available but I'm confident membership would be a percentage in the 90's. ASLEF has a clearly defined charter, which is available on the website, detailing the aspirations of the union and providing a framework for future negotiations.

Finally, I would like to say that it has been my pleasure to meet a number of railroaders in the USA whilst on my travels, including RWU Organizer Mark Burrows and General Secretary Ron Kaminkow. I hope to cross paths with many more in years to come. Keep on the pressure for improvements, and don't lose faith. Wishing you all a safe journey!

Matt Fawkes, is a locomotive engineer (train driver) in the United Kingdom, and serves as the Assistant Secretary for the Leicester Branch of The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF). Brother Matt will represent his union at the 'young workers (under 30) convention' of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in March, 2015.

