

Britain's trains disrupted in second widespread strike in a week



An employee speaks on the phone from inside a train at King's Cross railway station in London on July 27, 2022 as fresh railway strikes hit the country. - Around 40,000 British railway workers staged a walkout, a month after the largest strike in 30 years as the UK battles its worst cost-of-living crisis in decades. (Photo by CARLOS JASSO / AFP)

London, July 30 (RHC)-- About 5,000 railway workers across almost a quarter of Britain's network have gone on strike as part of a campaign for higher pay after the country's inflation rate hit its highest in 40 years.

The 24-hour walkout on Saturday is the second industrial action this week after another 40,000 workers staged a nationwide strike on Wednesday.

The strike, organised by train drivers' union ASLEF, was expected to cause "significant disruption" on Sunday morning as well, according to Network Rail, which runs Britain's rail infrastructure.

Almost all services on seven of the country's 34 train operators were cancelled, including regional networks for southeast and eastern England as well as long-distance lines linking London with southwest England, northeast England and Edinburgh.

Soaring inflation and patchy wage rises have exacerbated labour tensions across sectors including postal services, health, schools, airports and the judiciary.

Britain's train services are mostly run on a for-profit basis by foreign state-owned rail companies which receive short-term contracts and operating subsidies from the government. Those subsidies ballooned as passengers stayed home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan said the franchise agreements typically only provided for two percent pay rises for drivers. "At this time of the cost of living crisis we believe this Catch-22 situation can't go on," Whelan told BBC radio.

Steve Montgomery, managing director of rail operator First Rail and chair of the industry-wide Rail Delivery Group, said operators would give bigger pay rises only if train drivers agreed to changes in working practices that would save money. "We're not saying to people 'work longer hours', but to be more productive within the hours they currently have," he said.

Britain's consumer price inflation is currently 9.4 percent, the highest among the Group of Seven (G7) economies. Millions of workers – including police, doctors and teachers – received below-inflation pay rises as part of an annual pay review for public-sector staff.

Ministers have warned of the danger of a wage-price spiral, while unions have demanded bigger raises for their members. In June, about 40,000 cleaners, signallers, maintenance workers and station staff held a first 24-hour strike, which marked the biggest collective action in decades.

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