



Department
for Transport

From the Secretary of State
The Rt. Hon. Chris Grayling

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12 December 2016

Dear Colleague,

Many of you have written to me in the past few days to ask what the Government is doing to try to bring to an end the planned strike action on the network, and the ongoing work to rule that is disrupting services so much.

The first thing to explain is why this dispute is happening. The combined franchise, which includes Southern and Thameslink is currently going through a major programme of change that is designed to significantly increase capacity by the end of this decade. This has included the work at London Bridge and to expand capacity on the Thameslink route through London to a record level of 24 trains per hour. To do this requires significant use of new technology and new trains.

As a result, older trains are being phased out and replaced with a newer fleet which will include some of Britain's most state of the art, automated trains. For a long time the majority of the trains on this network have been operated by the driver from the cab, normally without a guard on board. This hasn't led to big drops in staff numbers – on the busier stations it has meant more staff on the platforms instead to help despatch trains quicker. This is essential to trying to get a congested railway to run on time.

As the new trains are introduced, so more of the older trains that depend on a guard are removed. Rather than simply getting rid of the guard, though, the plan has been to create a new On-board Supervisor role to provide better support for passengers. It is this change that the RMT, which represents the guards, has been fighting against – even though none of their members is losing their jobs or any money. In fact, there will be more on-board supervisors available on more trains than today.

This week's strikes, though, are by the drivers' union ASLEF, and are entirely politically motivated. ASLEF members will continue this week to drive Thameslink trains, which are driver only operated, on the same routes that their Southern members are boycotting. The independent rail safety inspector has said that these trains and the Southern approach, which mirrors what has happened on our railways for thirty years, is perfectly safe.

What has been most frustrating to everyone is that you are also experiencing routine problems on non-strike days too. The biggest factor behind this has been an ongoing and unofficial work to rule, with high levels of sickness, and a doubling of "broken down" trains whose faults cannot be replicated in the depot. However, there have also been too many failures of the Network Rail infrastructure, like signalling, and also very poor communication by the train company. These are things that also need to be sorted out. We have made a start on the infrastructure, but there is a long way to go. Passengers' interests must come first and to resolve these issues we need all staff to come back to work.

In essence this is a battle between the unions and the management over whether they will allow new technologies and new ways of working on the railway. It is deeply deeply unfair on the passengers who are left in the middle of this dispute.

My ministerial and official team and I have been working hard since we took over our jobs just under five months ago to try to find a way through this. But the unions appear to have little interest in resolving the dispute unless the management cave in totally to their demands. These are not just to stop the current modernisation process, but to start reversing 30 years of working practice changes right across the country.

When I met the General Secretary of ASLEF soon after my appointment, with virtually his first breath he promised me "10 years of industrial action." I have therefore believed it better to avoid direct ministerial involvement in negotiations during the autumn, as my involvement would make the issue even more political than it is.

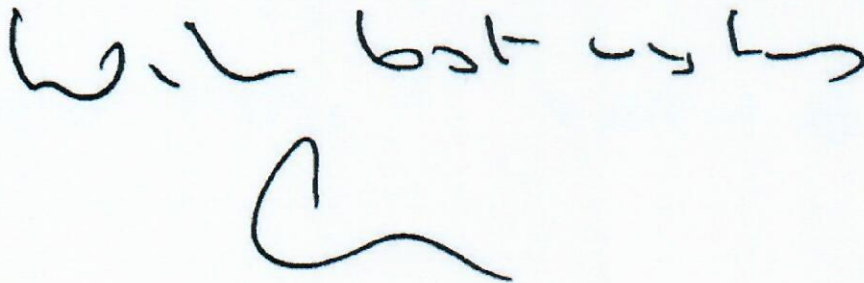
Following their appearance on the Today programme a week ago, I wrote to the unions offering to become involved and meet them for talks if they called off their planned strikes. They have not yet replied to the letters.

Yesterday, Southern offered further talks at ACAS, the conciliation service, to try to find a resolution. ASLEF didn't turn up. Last night Southern suggested another round of talks without preconditions today. The union refused. ASLEF demanded that Southern stopped taking legal action over the strike, but refused to suspend strike action in return. It's very frustrating and not the actions of a union that wants to act to get services back to normal.

There has been some suggestion that the solution is to hand over Southern to the Mayor of London. Southern is part of a franchise that stretches from Cambridge to Southampton, via Brighton – way beyond the political remit of the Mayor. Transport for London has no experience of running a complicated main line railway like this. Indeed it does not even run railways itself. The Overground is run by Arriva and it performs well as a simple network which is mainly self-contained and therefore there is less need to co-ordinate with other operators and services. When things go wrong it is much easier to recover quickly on the Overground, with less impact on passengers.

I am very committed to trying to solve this problem for you. I wish we were dealing with reasonable people on the union side. For all the shortcomings of the train operator – and there have been many – and the failures of the infrastructure – also many – it is difficult to resolve any of the other problems on this network while the union leadership seem hell bent on fermenting this dispute.

We will continue to do everything we can to resolve things, and are looking carefully at all options to do so. In the meantime I am really really sorry that you and your constituents are caught up in this with so much disruption to your lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. L. Grayling" with a stylized flourish below it.

Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT