

A 'new' approach to railway public ownership

We print here a statement sent recently by Norfolk for Nationalisation of Rail to the TUC London & South East Region (LESE)

Workers' control of the railways has been a recurring rallying call for over 100 years. From around 1900, industrial syndicalists like Tom Mann were arguing for a nationalised railway system in which industrial democracy would take centre stage. Similar sentiments emerged in the NUR and were heard down to 1948 when the railways were nationalised under the Labour government. But at no point in the post-war decades was any attempt made to introduce even the smallest measure of union or worker representation in decision-making under British Rail.

Today, following the growth of a militant spirit in the modern RMT in defending jobs and safety in the privatised industry, a revival of the case for forms of workers' and users' control needs to be debated within the trade union movement. John McDonnell has given the clearest possible signal that a future Labour government will seek to open a public-owned railway to the widest possible participation in decision-making. The current guards' dispute has also opened better channels of communication between the RMT and local/regional passenger groups.

As in the 1900s, when proposals for workers' control went hand-in-hand with workers' education (for example through the Plebs League and Labour College movement, both supported by the NUR), today's rail unions have an opportunity to prepare their members and staff reps for a new role and to build programmes of training in functional skills and education on topics such as railway economics, transport planning, ensuring accessibility and

accountability, working with local authorities and passenger groups, and the impact of Brexit. The European dimension of rail trades unions can also be placed on a new footing, echoing the importance of European links in the early 20th century.

With the increasing likelihood of a Labour government committed to the return of the railways to full public ownership, NOR4NOR (Norfolk for Nationalisation of Rail, www.NOR4NOR.org) calls on the constituent branches and trades council in LESE to campaign for public ownership and to discuss now what forms public ownership might take, given that the Labour Party aims to give full support to developing worker/union and community involvement in the running of the railways. Furthermore, to join local/regional campaigns where possible, to provide programmes of training for members/reps in industrial democracy and to seek ways of putting into place regional commissions bringing together representatives of all interested groups, commissions which would develop concrete plans for the running of the railways.

NOR4NOR has been campaigning for public ownership in East Anglia for over two years. It has published a Charter that includes proposals at both regional and national levels, a charter that outlines key policies and priorities that are, in our view, essential for a publicly-owned system. At the same time, NOR4NOR believes that planning is required on the forms that public ownership might take and how this could be developed. NOR4NOR plans to hold a summit in the spring of 2019 in order to launch a detailed discussion of such plans.