



The Association of British Commuters

From commuter campaigners at
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Paul Maynard MP

Rail Minister at Department for Transport

Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR

Dear Paul,

We are writing in response to your letter to MPs of 22nd November, which has now been widely circulated on social media.

You state in your letter that you are not even remotely happy with the situation – for passengers living through this on a daily basis, that is an understatement in the extreme. With today's announcement of an ASLEF drivers' strike, **the damage to the health and livelihoods of thousands of people in the south is about to reach its peak, and still your Department does not act – which is not only in your remit, but your urgent responsibility.**

The 12-car "state of the art" 700 class Thameslink trains that you refer to do offer slightly more passenger capacity, if not comfort, by removing seats and depriving standard class passengers of tables on the long commute from Brighton to London. However, as you know, neither the Thameslink programme nor these new trains are central to the dispute. The existing 377 class trains have also been equipped with cameras for Driver Controlled Operation and it is the botched attempt by Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) to move to Driver Controlled Operation, not new trains or the Thameslink programme, which has crippled Southern.

Oddly, your own department agrees with us in a letter published online from Alana Rea, Correspondence Manager for Passenger Services, on 16th November which states "the current situation has come about due to the intersection of three issues: understaffing on the part of GTR; the industrial action by the RMT union; and substantial engineering issues..." You seem to have omitted to mention understaffing on the part of GTR in your letter to Members of Parliament – why is this?

You refer twice in your letter to the current strikes as being inexplicable. In November 2015 the ASLEF and RMT unions published a statement online stating they were "completely opposed to Driver Only Operation" and committing to "campaign in unity to oppose any extension of DOO." Significant union opposition to GTR plans was completely predictable, and even forecast in the RSSB report commissioned into the matter. Instead, the DfT concealed plans for DOO from consultation with the unions, the public, and disability groups, and chose a stealth tactic of introduction; with GTR pushing industrial relationships to a breakdown early on with such measures as

preventing staff from parking at stations, and preventing rest day working. For a railway which your own department states is understaffed, the results have been disastrous.

Of the many concerns being raised over this hasty, stealth-like and incoherent implementation of DOO is the problem of disability access, as relates to the Platform-Train Interface (PTI). It is clear that the issue of PTI has been completely overlooked – and is mentioned only once in the so-called “independent” RSSB safety report on DOO. Since that time, we have seen GTR change the OBS role to include dispatch duties (so late did they acknowledge this oversight). At the same time, we note the new maps on the 377 trains, which now requires advance booking for disabled passengers all over the network. This compulsory pre-booking of travel, combined with the RSSB report’s clear anticipation of ‘natural wastage’ of staff, seems to indicate a future without the right of ‘turn up and go’ travel for the disabled – a clear breach of the Equality Act that Ann Bates OBE has suggested will set back access rights 30 years!

Passengers are exhausted. We can’t take our business elsewhere, we can’t get straight answers, and we are increasingly aware that we are viewed as cannon fodder in this dispute. We now understand that the enhanced compensation promised by the then Prime Minister in June this year will consist of 15 minute delay repay funded by our taxes, which has no firm date to be introduced.

We are waiting to learn whether your department will allow GTR to claim force majeure in connection with Southern – a verdict which is now unacceptably overdue. Given that your department recognises this railway was understaffed, industrial action over DOO was entirely predictable, and the disruption from Thameslink was anticipated and built into the commercial terms of your contract, we can assure you passengers would find awarding force majeure unjust.

Your letter does not propose a firm course of action, yet we need one now more than ever. Only the DfT has the authority to force a resolution of the industrial action perhaps in line with the swiftly resolved and forgotten Scotrail agreement. Only the DfT can release the details of how this franchise is managed and accept that the public interest in this outweighs commercial interests.

When the Department removed commercial risk from GTR in this franchise, it assumed accountability and is now failing the public with what is likely to go down in the history books as the rail scandal of a generation.

The quality of our working and family lives is now intolerable, and the damage wreaked on hundreds of thousands of the public in the South is quite frankly, unforgiveable. We insist on your urgent action now—to continue in the unaccountable manner you have chosen is nothing less than a betrayal to the public.

We await a response at your earliest convenience,

Sincerely,

Commuter campaigners from the Association of British Commuters