

Shapps: strikes are happening as rail battles remote working

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In a speech delivered at the Siemens maintenance plant in Hornsey, north London, secretary of state for transport Grant Shapps said that strikes were happening as the rail industry had to battle with “Zoom, Teams and remote working” as well as other forms of transport.

His comments come just before the railways are set to implement an emergency timetable for its network to protect key routes and freight from industrial action undertaken by RMT.

The RMT union has said it is taking action over pay and job losses. The organisation has also said the job losses would make the railways unsafe.

- **RMT announce three days of national strike action across the railway network**
- **More reaction on RMT vote for national strike**
- **RMT votes for strike across Network Rail and train operators**

Shapps began his speech by saying that recently planned reforms for the industry, taking place under Great British Railways, were a “profound belief in the railway’s future” and “a vote of confidence in the

industry and its workforce”.

He added: “Yet, here we are today, the railway just beginning to recover from the pandemic, and we’re on the verge of a national strike.

“These strikes are not only a bid to derail reforms that are critical to the network’s future and designed to inflict damage at the worst possible time, they are also an incredible act of self-harm by the union leadership.

“Make no mistake, unlike the past 25 years, when rising passenger demand, year after year, was taken for granted by the industry, today the railway is in a fight.

“It’s not only competing against other forms of public and private transport, it’s in a battle with Zoom, Teams and remote working. In case the unions haven’t noticed, the world has changed.

“Many commuters, who three years ago had no alternative to taking the train, today have the option of not travelling at all. Wave them goodbye and it will endanger the jobs of thousands of rail workers.

“The last thing the railway should be doing right now is alienating passengers and freight customers with a long and damaging strike.

“Unions claim these strikes are about a pay freeze. This is wrong, we are not imposing a pay freeze now COVID is in the past.

“So, I say to the workforce, your union bosses have driven you to the verge of a national strike under false pretences. And rather than protect your jobs, they are actually threatening your jobs.”

Face to Face

The speech was delivered a day after RMT called for a face-to-face meeting with Shapps.

In a letter, general secretary of the union, Mick Lynch, said: “I am writing to seek an urgent meeting with the government, without any pre-conditions, to discuss the national rail disputes prior to the planned strike action next week and I would be grateful if this could be arranged without delay. As you will be aware both this year and last year, meetings have taken place under the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG).

“...it has become obvious in our discussions with employers since the RMT ballot result that the government is retaining control over the conduct of negotiations with the RMT, and the Treasury in particular is calling the shots.

“In effect in recent weeks the union has been negotiating with the government, but the government have not been in the room.

“I am now therefore calling for a meeting with you and the Chancellor Rishi Sunak. I also note the government have decided to have a parliamentary debate on the dispute today. So, as well as speaking at

the despatch box about the dispute, I hope you will be able to speak to me directly about resolving the dispute.”