

British railway reforms promise an end to fragmentation

The failures of British railways since their privatisation in the 1990s have become increasingly evident: rising fares, delays and corporate collapses. Last year, the government announced reform plans to address the fragmentation of the franchise-based system and create a single body that is responsible for the railways of Great Britain. However, unions, campaigners and the majority of the public want to go even further, with mass support for public ownership, which is already happening in the devolved administrations of Wales and Scotland.

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In May 2021, the UK government published the long-awaited Williams-Shapps Plan for railway reform. It seeks to address problems in the sector, which it says is 'too complicated, too confusing for passengers, too expensive to run and improve, too difficult to lead, and too hard to reform.' Railways in Britain were state-owned in the post-war period, but privatised in the 1990s by the then Conservative government, following a wave of privatisations in the 1980s. Robin Jenks, policy advisor at the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA), explains: '[The railway] was broken up into a number of different bits and mostly sold off. We have run a campaign consistently, for a number of years, for public ownership.'

According to a 2019 survey¹ by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) that surveyed 800 rail workers, 80% of rail workers believe nationalisation would lead to better

industrial relations, and 89% of workers believe the privatised system should be replaced with a publicly owned and nationally integrated railway. As many as 94% think train companies are most motivated by making a profit instead of providing a service for passengers, and 80% think their company will try to increase profits at the expense of jobs and working conditions.

There is widespread public support for public ownership, too. In 2019, campaign group We Own It, which campaigns for utilities to be taken into public ownership, ran a survey that showed that a majority of the British public supported public ownership of the railways. Johnsbosco Nwogbo, lead campaigner from We Own It, explains: 'The public has realised privatisation did not work. We were told it was going to cost less – it hasn't. Rail fares have actually increased by 23% in real terms since privatisation. We were told private companies were going to invest and modernise the trains, and they haven't done so. Every theory that was used to justify privatisation has just not materialised. And that is for a very simple reason – the private companies are incentivised to make profit and nothing else.' In the financial year 2019-2020, train franchise operators in the UK together paid out 262 million pounds in dividends.²

Public ownership across the board would also create a more united sector in terms of workforce. Robin Jenks notes that public ownership would mean going back to national collective bargaining – 'whereas now, we take issues with pay, conditions and so on largely within the individual companies. There are some caveats around pensions, health and safety. Whilst we have health and safety issues with individual companies, there are standards which are enforced, and guidance produced by several national bodies that companies are obliged to follow.'

'Papering over the cracks'

Railways are now run by over 20 different, mainly private, companies. Some train operators are publicly owned because the government, as the operator of last resort, has taken over failing private companies. The franchise model effectively ended with the Covid pandemic, when the government announced in March 2020 that it would transfer all revenue and cost risk to the government, with train companies running services for a fee. The review that led to the Williams-Shapps Plan, however, was commissioned as early as 2018, after a

1. <https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/rmt-publications/why-the-uk-needs-a-nationally-integrated-and-publicly-owned/>
2. <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/2036/rail-industry-finance-uk-statistical-release-2020-21.pdf>

badly coordinated timetable change across the network exposed the fragmented system's lack of leadership and accountability. It caused service disruption that lasted for weeks in parts of England.

The government's reform plan, called the 'Williams-Shapps Plan' after its authors Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps and independent chair Keith Williams, seeks to address this fragmentation. It promises to 'bring the railways back together' under a new public body, Great British Railways (GBR), that will 'run and plan the rail network, own the infrastructure, and receive the fare revenue'.³ Franchises will be replaced by 'passenger service contracts': GBR will set timetables, fares and other aspects of the service, while train operators will provide the services. Under the previous model, every operator set their own timetables and fares and retained the revenue.

than double the all-industry rates. The most prevalent causes of ill health are hand-arm vibration syndrome, mental health problems, and musculoskeletal disorders.⁴

For workers, a change in ownership does not mean an immediate change in conditions – it is the 'same job in a different uniform' as Rae says. The UK has legislation to protect employees, called Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations (TUPE). This applies when a business moves from one employer to another, as well as when a service contract ends and is given to a new contractor. Under the TUPE regulations, the new employer takes over employees' contracts, including terms and conditions of employment, holiday entitlement and the start date of the employment period. Any collective agreements previously made and responsibility for violation of employees' rights under the previous contract are transferred to the new employer.

3. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/994603/gbr-williams-shapps-plan-for-rail.pdf
4. <https://www.orr.gov.uk/sites/default/files/om/closing-the-gap-on-health-industry-progress-2019.pdf>

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However, unions say the reforms do not go far enough. When the Williams-Shapps Plan was launched, the general secretary of TSSA, Manuel Cortes, said it was only 'papering over the cracks'. Nadine Rae, organising director at TSSA, says: 'I don't think anyone, certainly from the trade union movement, expected a complete removal of privatisation, despite our hopes. But we did expect there to be some addressing of the key failures of the system and how that was not actually delivering competition, adequate investment or better services for passengers at all.'

Uncertain consequences for health and safety

Britain's railways are among the safest in Europe for both workers and passengers, and the Williams-Shapps plan involves no immediate change to safety and standards across the sector. According to the Office for Rail and Road (ORR), the main regulator responsible for health and safety, rates of work-related ill health in rail workers are broadly comparable with those in construction workers, 2-5% and 3-5% respectively. However, sickness absence in rail is more

Whilst Jenks notes that public ownership would bring some benefits to health and safety in terms of bringing all the conversations under one body and facilitating enforcement, the main threat the unions see to occupational health and safety are job cuts. Network Rail is planning cuts to save 100 million pounds in maintenance and 170 million pounds in management. 'It's not just about safe systems, it's also about making sure that you have sufficient staff to carry out those systems,' says Jenks. 'They want to cut out 1 000 managers, in addition to as many as 2 600 track workers out of about 12 000. That's huge. We are asking questions about how that impacts on health and safety.'

Safety standards have improved since the time of Network Rail's predecessor Railtrack, a private company. 'In pursuit for profits they cut safety standards, particularly in track maintenance. This led to various disasters around [the year] 2000,' Jenks explains. But he stresses that there is no room for complacency. The current standards have been created as responses to fatal accidents. The Railway Safety and Standards Board and Rail Accident Investigation Branch were established in 2003 and 2005 respectively,

following recommendations from an inquiry into the management and regulations of UK railway safety. It was triggered by an accident in 1999 that killed 31 people and injured 417. Fatal accidents also took place in 1997, 2000 and 2002. After the 2000 derailment that killed four, Railtrack was put into administration. It was replaced by publicly owned Network Rail in 2002.

Some opportunities, some caveats

Nadine Rae finds positives in the way the Williams-Shapps Plan emphasises training, skills and diversity. She explains that the unions expect the railways to change. 'We will be embracing new technology. In particular, some of the technological changes will make the railways safer. What we think is most important is just transition, so that workers who need to shift their skillsets have the opportunity to do so.'

TSSA is running a campaign called 'Future of Rail' to encourage employers to plan for the future, including in terms of skills and technological change. Rae emphasises that new technology does not only mean jobs disappearing – there will also be a demand for different types of jobs. This means that the industry will need to attract a more diverse workforce to ensure that every type of skillset, insight and lived experience is there for reshaping the railways.

The union is involved with the National Skills Academy for Rail, which is working with the government to monitor and address skills gaps. They also advocate for creating opportunities through apprenticeships, and ensuring that workers have opportunities for career progression.

'No longer do people want to be stuck in the same job forever,' Rae says. A TSSA survey in 2015 showed that 37% of members had not received any training to advance their career.

However, the government's plans include 3.5 million pounds of savings by 2024. 'That takes anything that is possibly good from the

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5. <https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2021/09/latest-figures-show-the-uk-rail-sector-was-booming-before-pandemic-losses/>

Shapps-Williams report and puts it all into question. How can you deliver meaningful change when you decimate the amount of staff that are in the network?' Rae asks. 'Let's face it, if you provide a public service, it costs money.' She points out that for every pound invested in railways, there are 2.5 pounds generated into the wider economy.⁵

Wales and Scotland are going public

In the UK, some policy areas are devolved, including transport. In Northern Ireland, railways are publicly owned and physically connected to those in the Republic of Ireland, hence the planned railway reforms only apply to Great Britain.

Wales brought railways into public ownership in February 2021, and Scotland will do the same in April 2022. Welsh rail services are now operated by Transport for Wales. The move was triggered by the significant reduction in passenger numbers during the Covid pandemic, and the Welsh government intends it to ensure long-term financial stability.

Gemma Southgate manages digital communications with passengers for Transport for Wales. She joined the railways seven years ago. 'This is my career. I don't see that I

would work anywhere else. With the redundancies in England, I don't think that others would feel the same,' she says. 'I feel that positivity and energy that comes with the new trains, with trying to make things more sustainable to benefit the people of Wales. I do feel that it is a network for the people of Wales, not for private investors.'

Wales has been hit hard by deindustrialisation. Southgate is excited that Transport for Wales and the Welsh government have put an emphasis on investment and the creation of high-skilled jobs, including a new train factory in Newport, where she is from, that will assemble new trains and receive a share of the 800 million pounds invested in new trains. 'It is great to see that investment in Wales, to see that there are high-skilled jobs in places like Newport that are losing jobs in traditional sectors,' she says.

Railway workers in Wales received a 1% pay rise last year despite the pandemic, and will this year receive a rise of 3.3% in line with the previous year's retail price index (RPI). In England, there has been a pay freeze since the start of the pandemic. Southgate says: 'I have union colleagues in England, their booking offices are being closed, timetables are being scaled back. That is just not the case in Wales.' ●



↑ There is widespread support for public ownership of Britain's railways amongst both the workers and the public. Photos: © Belga