

# HS2 and the trade unions



## What is the trade union position on HS2?

Trade union positions on HS2 are rooted in the views of the rail unions. Both the RMT and TSSA support HS2.

HS2 is urgently needed to increase capacity on our rail network, in doing so it will help get cars and lorries off our roads and aid the reinvigoration of the economies of our northern cities. *Manuel Cortes, TSSA*

No one has fought harder for the investment and modernisation required to drag the UK's railways out of the slow lane than RMT, and the development of high speed links must be a key component of our rail plans. *Bob Crow, RMT General Secretary, 10.1.12.*

This position is supported by the TUC, whose General Secretary, Frances O'Grady, is a member of the HS2 Growth Task Force:

(HS2) can create thousands of new jobs and boost regional growth, as well as providing a much needed boost for our construction and manufacturing industries. *Frances O'Grady*

This support is qualified however by important concerns.

Thousands of jobs in rail construction, renewals and maintenance are under threat from Sir Roy McNulty's proposals to cut staffing across the rail industry. If ministers are serious about delivering the rail infrastructure of the future, they must defend the jobs of those skilled and experienced workers who will be essential if HS2 is to become a reality. *Frances O'Grady*

In reality HS2 is a subsidy for private construction firms that fund the Tory party and the banks that stand behind them, with no guarantee for domestic procurement, employment, training or union recognition for local workers. *Alex Gordon, RMT*

## HS2 and jobs

For both the TUC and the rail unions, the jobs issue is paramount. But - as the concerns noted above imply – scaling down rail jobs (from ticketing to drivers) is an integral part of HSR. There are no guarantees that contracts for HS2 will be UK-based, and for the European Commission, for whom HS2 is part of an EU-wide HSR network, the aim is to dismantle all vestiges of nationalised rail across the EU.

Moreover, the interests of the TUC and the rail unions are not the same. HS2 has big implications for public spending and thus for other unions. The rail unions appear to have supported HS2 because they think that if it is cancelled it will not be replaced by other rail investment.

However this position is not compatible with calls for a national transport strategy. HS2 is a stand-alone project, poorly connected to the rest of the rail network. It does not address the most serious problems of capacity and congestion on the network, which lie elsewhere, on commuter lines for example. It was initiated by Lord Adonis, an unelected technocrat, and is failing to stand up to the scrutiny of elected politicians on the Public Accounts Committee and of democratically accountable institutions such as the National Audit Office. Thus for those who support a national transport strategy, HS2 should, at the very least, be sidelined until we have one.

## Public spending choices

Of course, there are some supporters of HS2 who argue that it is not a case of having either HS2 or other transport investments – we can have both. The problems with this are threefold.

- First, it is not the case that HS2 and other transport projects are both good investments. HS2 is a bad investment in any terms. To give just two examples: HS2 would mean a decline in classic rail intercity services in places like Coventry which it bypasses; and the cost of each job created by HS2 (even accepting the government's inflated figures) would be about ££400,000 - £500,000, compared to less than a tenth of that for jobs created by local regeneration projects.
- Secondly, we are now beginning to see, as regional lobby groups begin to generate programmes for secondary packages of transport investment to support HS2, that whole regional transport budgets will be skewed towards HS2, to the inevitable detriment of competing projects. At the same time, the financial demands of these programmes shows that the true cost of HS2 will be much more than that of the line itself.
- Thirdly, however much public investment is available, it is not limitless. There will always be socially and economically valuable projects which miss the cut. So HS2 would always be at the expense of something else.

## Better alternatives

And of course, there would be far better ways of spending the £50bn. The New Economics Foundation has undertaken detailed analysis which documents how the money could be used to upgrade the existing inter-city network, overhaul regional rail, improve walking and biking infrastructure at the same time as upgrading the national broadband network.

A major programme of investment across the country that combined network electrification, complementary enhancement (eg four tracking on certain corridors) and a selective re-opening programme could be achieved quickly and have a far greater economic impact than HS2. *Paul Salvesen, Author of Railpolitik and Colne Valley CLP*

This approach would support jobs and skills in the rail industry more widely across the country, thus meeting the TUC's 'five tests' much better than HS2 does.

The TUC's five tests for high speed rail are: what does it mean for jobs and skills: what about the supply chain opportunities; is it affordable; how will it benefit the English regions, Scotland and Wales; is there the political will to deliver? - <http://touchstoneblog.org.uk/2010/03/five-tests-for-high-speed-rail>

This kind of package would be much more effective in promoting local and regional growth than one stand-alone megaproject. Surely this is what the TUC and the rail unions should be backing, not HS2?

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