



August 2022

On the wrong track: What the public and rail workers think of the government's handling of the rail dispute

The public oppose rail cuts

The government is out of step with the majority of the public over its support for rail cuts. Public opinion is opposed to the government and the rail industry's plans to cut staff from stations, trains and track maintenance.

- A YouGov poll of 2,500 British adults published on 21 June 2022 showed that **60% oppose getting rid of staffed ticket offices at most railway stations**, with only 19% tending to support the move. Women were more likely to oppose closures at 62%. Opposition was strongest in the South of England (67%).¹
- A poll conducted by Opinium of 2,000 adults for the RMT showed that **63% opposed cuts to station and on-board staff**, with only 17% supporting the proposals.²
- The same poll found that **70% opposed cuts to the inspection and maintenance of rail tracks** with only 13% in favour.³

This reinforces the general findings of Transport Focus who conducted research into passenger and potential passengers' attitudes during the pandemic.

Transport Focus found that among rail users and former rail users **'there is a strong sense that the ideal response to the pandemic would be to see more staff...rather than less.'**⁴

¹ [Daily Question | 21/06/2022 | YouGov](#)

² [RMT on Opinium Poll - rmt](#)

³ [RMT on Opinium Poll - rmt](#)

⁴ <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/transport-user-community-role-of-staff-in-passengers-feeling-safe/>

Rail workers believe the cuts will make rail travel less safe, less pleasant and less accessible

The people who operate the rail network on a day to day basis, and who are best placed to know, are deeply concerned about the impact that the proposed cuts will have on safety, passenger experience and accessibility on Britain's railways.

A survey of 10,000 rail workers, published on 29 July found that:

- 92% of Network Rail workers agreed the companies proposed cuts will put passengers at greater risk with 75% strongly agreeing.
- 88% of station staff responding said that the government and industry's plans would worsen the passenger experience. 89% of station staff said that the plans would worsen the experience for disabled passengers and those who need more support.
- More than 85% of on-Board staff surveyed said they believed that the government's plans for introducing more Driver Only Operated trains would worsen the passenger experience, with 93% saying they believed that it would worsen the experience of travelling by train for disabled passengers and those needing more support.⁵

As the cost-of-living crisis escalates, there is strong public support for the rail workers' cause and little support for the government's response

The government's response to the rail strikes has been to escalate rhetoric and bring in more legal restrictions against unions. Tory leadership contenders vie with each other to sound toughest in attacking unions while Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has proposed a 16-point plan to effectively ban strikes in transport and other 'critical infrastructure'.

But again, the government is out of step with a public increasingly angry about the cost-of-living crisis.

- Polling conducted by Opinium between 10 and 14 June showed that **70% of the public believe that rail workers should have a negotiated pay rise that takes into account the cost of living**, whilst just 11% disagree.⁶
- IPSOS polling from 22 June showed that **the public has significantly more sympathy with rail workers than with the government and train companies.**⁷
- A different Opinium poll, published on 30 June, showed that **public sympathy for rail workers grew over the course of the first 3-day strike from 37% to**

⁵ [RMT conducts massive rail staff survey - rmt](#)

⁶ [RMT on Opinium Poll - rmt](#)

⁷ [Public divided over support for rail strikes | Ipsos](#)

45%. Opposition fell from 45% to 37%.⁸

- The government's punitive response is out of step too. According to the June Opinium poll, **59% believe rail workers have the right to strike** if negotiations fail and only 18% are against this, undermining the case for legislating against the right to strike.
- Instead of ramping up the attacks on unions, **62% believe that the government should intervene to ensure that rail companies meet rail workers' concerns.** Only 14% are against this.⁹

⁸ [Public now support rail strikes after Mick Lynch TV studio tour, poll finds \(msn.com\)](#)

⁹ [RMT on Opinium Poll - rmt](#)