

# UK: The RMT, class politics and identity politics

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**Becky Crocker is a railway worker and activist in the RMT union, former chair of its Women's Advisory Committee. Here she responds to some of the issues raised in the recent debates about RMT activist [Eddie Dempsey's remarks](#) at a rally organised by "The Full Brexit", and issues in the wider debate about the relationship between "identity politics" and class struggle.**

The railway workforce is overwhelmingly white, male, able-bodied and straight. The discrimination and lack of diversity in our industry is a problem that the left and trade union movement urgently needs to register and challenge.

In nearly 13 years as an RMT activist working on London Underground, I have been a workplace rep, helped organize London Underground cleaners and participated in and chaired the National Women's Committee. My experience has led me to appreciate the importance of a concept of class struggle that embraces liberation politics. By this I mean that we must explicitly challenge sexism, racism, homophobia and all forms of oppression facing marginalised groups; this must be a central element of our struggle against the bosses. The levels of discrimination in the rail industry mean that it is particularly important for the RMT to adopt this approach where it organises.

In this context, the recent comments by prominent RMT activist Eddie Dempsey about the relationship between 'ethnic minorities' and the 'working class', and wider comments about the relationship between 'identity politics' and class politics, are a cause for concern.

Govia Thameslink Railway estimated last year that out of 19,000 train drivers in the country, just 5% are women. Despite London's 51% female population, only 23.4% of Transport for London's workforce is female - 17.1% on London Underground, 15.6% in operational, frontline roles. Levels of women's employment at TfL are falling [1]. Network Rail, responsible for the country's track and signals, calculated that at its current recruitment rate, it would take 65 years to reach 30% female employment across the whole organization [2].

Just 6% of Network Rail's employees are black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), compared to a national average in the private sector of 16% [3]. In London, where 40% of the population is BAME, only 26.1% of TfL's workforce is BAME - 10.4% at senior management level. Low levels of representation are mirrored at London Underground [4].

The levels of recorded disabilities are eye-wateringly low - at TfL just 512 people out of a workforce of 27,453 people disclosed that they have a disability. There are also low levels of representation of LGBTQ+ people. In a 2014 Network Rail survey, 83% of respondents did not answer the question about sexual orientation [5]. A minority also responded in TfL's survey on sexual orientation, which revealed that gay men comprise 1.4% of TfL's workforce and gay women 0.4%, with even lower

levels of representation for bisexual men and women.

What's going on? I don't feel I can fully answer. Various types of discrimination feed into the history of our industry and the ways that it is organised. Some of the patterns of discrimination won't be obvious to me because I have not experienced or thought about them enough; I hope this article will prompt discussion and a more thorough answer to this question. One partial answer I feel I can offer is: sexism. Throughout my working life, especially since joining the Underground, sexism and the daily battle against it have come to form a significant part of who I am and how I understand the world.

In the context of a sexist capitalist society, that still expects women to carry out the majority of caring roles, shift work presents a huge barrier to women's employment in the rail industry. If you set your alarm for 3.30am for a 5am start, or have to work seven consecutive night shifts every month, it can feel that you're pulled away from home too much at times when you are needed. At the end of my maternity leave, I was due back at work to follow a punishing roster that included a lot of nights and only one weekend off every couple of months.

If I hadn't been supported by the union to secure a part time morning job, I would have taken the well-trodden path of leaving an industry I love because I couldn't see how, on a practical level, I would combine shift work and bringing up my daughter. When would I have slept?! In Network Rail, in 2013, 181 women went on maternity leave. 107 of them left the business within six months [6]. We might break through barriers to get jobs in the rail industry in the first place, but holding onto them while performing caring roles is yet another challenge.

The practical barriers are overlaid onto the cultural barriers. This is an industry that still routinely uses gendered terms - 'train man', 'pilot man', 'second man', 'manned stations'. The train drivers' union, ASLEF, is the 'Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen' - a casual piece of everyday sexism, which almost goes unnoticed. What a good, proud 'Railwayman' looks like is still a very traditional male conception - and, probably, a very white, straight male one too. The conception of how you have to look and behave in order to 'fit in' and be deemed 'good at the job' is very narrow and unconsciously discriminatory. In addition to presenting barriers to women, I speculate that this contributes to the low percentage of BAME applicants recruited by Network Rail [7]. It probably accounts, in part, for the low level of disclosure about sexual identity in the reports I quoted earlier.

Low levels of minority representation, coupled with traditional attitudes about who is 'good at the job' lay a fertile breeding ground for attitudes and behaviours that we would hope had been pushed back by four decades of workplace equalities legislation. The gendered language is important; it normalises the idea that 'the people who work here are men'. It contributes to an environment where women are not respected as equals and are routinely sexually harassed and belittled.

In my time on the Underground I have been violently sexually assaulted by passengers on two occasions, and both times I have been ridiculed by managers and colleagues for taking it seriously. One manager, who attended to me on the night of an incident, even had the gall to say about my assailant's actions: 'I'm sure we've all done similar things when we've been out on a Saturday night'. The lack of understanding I experienced meant that these incidents had a more serious impact on my mental health than might otherwise have been the case.

When I was a Customer Service Assistant, I was sexually harassed by my colleagues a lot. The problem was so widespread and endemic in the culture that it took me several years to understand that the 'banter' and 'flirting' I was experiencing could even be defined as sexual harassment. I fought a bullying case against one supervisor for his overbearing behavior towards me. For minor mistakes that would go unnoticed in my colleagues, my supervisors would call me a 'dumb blonde',

'dizzy cow', 'daft bitch', etc. Even though I have now managed to get promoted to Supervisor, I still feel I have to fight for basic respect and confidence from my colleagues in my ability to do my job.

The sad thing is that nearly every woman I work with on London Underground will say that they have been treated in a similar way at some time. Even more sadly, I know that the culture at London Underground is light years ahead of some Train Operating Companies. One guard, working for South Western Railway, told me a few years ago that there are some mess rooms she can't even go in because of the kinds of 'banter' she would be forced to listen to.

The experience of working in the rail industry is undoubtedly harder if you're black, gay, disabled or a woman. Therefore, there is a crying need for the unions in our industry to champion liberation politics and the struggles of equalities groups. We want a strong working-class movement, where no section of our class is oppressed on the grounds of their race, gender or any other characteristic. If we win equality, we are better able to unite. If we tolerate discrimination within our class, we are weak and divided.

The RMT is the strongest union in our industry; it organizes all sections of the workforce and has the best record of mounting effective fights against management. It represents individual members well in discrimination cases. However, within its political culture, liberation politics is sidelined. Its structures sideline the struggles of equalities groups.

The RMT has four equalities committees: Black and Ethnic Minorities (BEM), Lesbian Gay Transgender and Bisexual + (LGBT+), women and disabled people. The RMT's constitution only grants them the power to 'advise' the traditionally all-male, all-white leading body, the executive. I have pushed many resolutions through the equalities structures that have been carried out partially or not at all - including a very personally-felt one about challenging sexual assault and sexual harassment. When activists moved proposals to increase the power of the equalities committees at the RMT 2018 AGM, the attempt was obstructed by the current leadership of the union. We made some gains, but the leadership convinced delegates to vote down some of the most significant reforms.

Sadly, we're in a situation in the RMT where we still need to win the argument about the urgency of organising around equalities. We're still having to convince people that liberation politics does not 'divide' workers' struggle; that in fact, it aims to eradicate the discrimination that gives rise to our division. We're in a situation where the union is not taking up and throwing its weight behind the struggles of the most oppressed and marginalised groups within our industry.

This is why, when reading recent comments by Eddie Dempsey at a public rally of the 'Full Brexit' speaker tour, my heart sinks. The comment that is the most troubling, in my view, is this:

*Too many in the Labour Party have made a calculation that there's a certain section at the top end of the working class, in alliance with people, they calculate, from ethnic minorities and liberals, that's enough to get them into power.*

This comment makes a disturbing distinction between the 'working class' and people from 'ethnic minorities' as if these are two separate entities. The unspoken assumption is that the 'working class' is white. Even more troubling is the implication is that 'ethnic minorities' join in alliance with the top section of the working class to derail it away from class politics. Eddie has since corrected his statement, saying that instead of 'liberals', he meant, 'neoliberals'. In my mind, that's worse. It means that this comment is intended to suggest that ethnic minorities are a force exerting neoliberal, anti-working class influence on the working class.

When a prominent RMT activist and former executive member uses his position in the labour movement to gain influence for ideas such as this, it is very serious. Under this conception of trade unionism, the struggles of non-white people are 'other' – even opposed – to workers' struggle in general. What does it mean for our union's collective attempt to organise a diverse group of workers to exert our power against the bosses? Senior figures in the RMT, including the General Secretary Mick Cash, have publicly defended Eddie for his comments. Is this really where RMT's priorities should lie at this point? The RMT organises an industry with structural, historic and serious levels of discrimination against all minority groups. It needs to go above and beyond when it comes to championing the struggles of the most oppressed members of our class. This does the very opposite.

Criticism of 'liberals' and 'liberal identity politics' has been a running theme in Eddie Dempsey's social media profile for some time. One of the most striking examples is this:

This conveys the idea that there is an opposition between identity politics and working-class politics – and even, that identity politics is the enemy, the source of working-class defeat.

I have criticisms myself of 'identity politics'. It focuses on who is speaking, rather than the ideas that are spoken. It can be a source of disunity and depoliticisation. It implies that we cannot engage in struggles against oppression unless we have personal experience of that oppression, which forms a barrier to fighting as part of the working-class movement for the liberation of all oppressed groups. However, I would never wish to imply that identity politics is the actual enemy of the working class.

Triumphant neoliberal, anti-working class politics, a capitalist class eroding working-class living standards and smashing the trade union movement: these have been the real enemies of the working class for a generation. To name 'identity politics' as the cause of working-class defeat is to mis-name the problem. It diverts the working-class movement from the necessary task of fighting the capitalist class. We must be clear: the problem is capitalism, not liberalism.

Moreover, as a prominent activist in the RMT, Eddie needs to be very careful in categorising identity politics as an enemy. Nuanced criticism of identity politics is one thing, but as an activist in an industry with huge problems of discrimination, Eddie has a responsibility to overwhelmingly, unambiguously champion the struggles of oppressed, minority groups.

His views on 'liberal identity politics' have caused ambiguity about his attitude to racism. A Twitter post last year prompted him to issue this clarification:

*All socialists should be anti racists. I don't argue racism shouldn't be rooted out and fought mercilessly. I'm saying liberal identity politics is useless as a method of understanding the struggle and far from being effective is actually debilitating for any left movement.*

(5:41 AM – 20 Nov 2018)

If you're having to clarify that you are in fact in favour of fighting racism, then your criticism of identity politics is at the very least striking the wrong balance.

The ambiguity on the question of liberation politics is no coincidence. It is consistent with his record in the RMT. Despite his role in organising cleaners and migrant workers, Eddie has not been a champion of the struggles of equalities groups within our union.

Last year, Michelle Rodgers beat Steve Shaw to become the first female President in our union's 100+ year history. Michelle decided to stand for President when Shaw began his campaign with a letter to the RMT's magazine that rubbished the equalities agenda within the union, prompting an outcry from many BEM, women, and LGBT+ activists. Championing the RMT's equalities groups was

a key issue throughout the Presidential campaign. Yet Eddie Dempsey was one of Steve Shaw's most outspoken campaigners.

Eddie did not support proposed reforms to the RMT's constitution to give more power to the equalities committees within the union. When these were debated at the 2018 AGM, general secretary Mick Cash led the opposition to them. Eddie is now a strong supporter of Cash's re-election.

Eddie also gave a quote to a *Morning Star* article in 2018 suggesting that there was a groundswell of 'concern' within the RMT about proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act (see [here](#)). The Women's and LGBT+ Committees of the union have since reaffirmed their support for trans rights. This context makes it more difficult to look on Eddie's criticism of 'identity politics' as something benign.

In fact, while fiercely dismissing it, Eddie adopts a form of identity politics of his own. In a statement published in name of RMT young members without their collective, democratic input, which has now been taken down, [Clive Lewis' attack](#) on Eddie's recent comments is described as an example of 'the contempt shown to normal working people'. Eddie is hailed as a 'lifelong railway worker'. What is a 'normal' working person? What does it mean to be a 'lifelong' railway worker? He uses his identity as a rail worker to claim some kind of working-class authenticity.

The concept of what an 'authentic' working-class person looks like is shaped by traditional attitudes and high levels of discrimination within industries such as ours. Any left winger must be very careful about appealing to working-class authenticity because this 'authentic' identity inevitably excludes the people who are already the most marginalised and oppressed in our industry and in our class.

What has Eddie's identity got to do with this anyway? Eddie has not been criticised because he is a working-class person, but because of the politics of what he said. He should be able to defend his politics without falling back on his identity to suggest that his ideas are above criticism. For all his professed hatred of identity politics, Eddie is willing to invoke it if it helps his case. What's the difference? Is identity politics acceptable if your 'identity' is white, male and working-class?

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## P.S.

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<https://theclarionmag.org/2019/04/13/the-rmt-class-politics-and-identity-politics/>

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## Footnotes

[1] Transport for London Workforce Monitoring Report, 2016-17

[2] Network Rail 'diversity and inclusion strategy', 2014-19

[3] Network Rail 'diversity and inclusion strategy', 2014-19

[4] Transport for London Workforce Monitoring Report, 2016-17

[5] Network Rail 'diversity and inclusion strategy', 2014-19

[6] Network Rail 'diversity and inclusion strategy', 2014-19

[7] Network Rail 'diversity and inclusion strategy', 2014-19