

A COMMUNIST MAYORALTY

Talking Points – Rail

FRANCHISING

It's simply not good enough that the government has effectively handed over the new HS2 superfast rail line to the franchise owner of the West Coast line in its decision over Phase One of the £50 billion project. Given that this is being paid for by every taxpayer in Britain, everyone should be able to afford to travel on it and that can only come with a public owned service. We simply can't afford any longer to allow the rip-off merchants who have siphoned off profits from the last two decades of privatisation carry on with their act.

We already have the scandal of low paid earners subsidising the likes of billionaire tax exile Sir Richard Branson who provides sky-high fares on the West Coast line. Rail travel should not be solely for the benefit of businessmen, if we are serious about ending the north-south divide.

Britain needs not only a new high-speed rail line the West Midlands needs a high-speed rail network. Passenger rail services operating under the franchise system let out by central government have seen private train operators effectively make a complete mess of delivery of railways.

RAIL DEVOLUTION

A phase of 'rail devolution' would pass control for the specification, management, and in some cases the procurement of certain rail franchises to local bodies. A proposal for a devolved local rail network for the West Midlands at a wider level than the Combined Authority has considerable support, including across the main parties.

West Midlands Rail has emerged; this partnership of fourteen Metropolitan District, Shire and Unitary local transport authorities would cover:

- Birmingham
- Coventry
- Dudley
- Herefordshire
- Northamptonshire
- Sandwell

- Solihull
- Shropshire
- Staffordshire
- Telford and Wrekin
- Walsall
- Warwickshire
- Wolverhampton
- Worcestershire

This clearly has the potential to ensure widespread local involvement, given the democratic links involved. Whilst franchising still leaves a lot to be desired and a return to public ownership would be welcomed, this devolution offers an important step towards ending the decline of rail as a contribution not only to a growing economy but also to a safer and healthier environment.

An example of the possibilities is that the London Midland franchise which provides local rail services is due to be renewed in 2017 and the WMR Partner Authorities are seeking greater control and influence over future franchises through devolution in discussions with the Secretary of State for Transport.

Nonetheless, it is important that this approach delivers improved outcomes for passengers. Preparations for the new West Midlands franchise is now underway and the contract for it is due to commence in October 2017.

CLOSED LINES

Whilst we have long advocated the opening up of closed stations and lines, there are now serious developments along these lines to support, such as the campaign by the Stourbridge Line User Group for the restoration of a rail passenger service from Stourbridge Junction to Dudley and beyond.

There are three options

- a Metro service from Brierley Hill to Wednesbury linking with the existing Line 1 to provide through services to Wolverhampton and Birmingham.
- a tram/train service from Stourbridge Junction to Walsall and beyond.
- a heavy rail service from Worcestershire to Lichfield providing an alternative cross-country service.

Reinstating this route would have both passenger and freight benefits. It would reduce road congestion and have the potential to make the controversial 'Brownhills Eastern Bypass' unnecessary, whilst allowing rail freight to bypass congested Birmingham and potentially remove heavy lorries off the roads.

Reopening rail lines across the country would go a long way to improving public transport and tackling rail overcrowding.

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP OF REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Just as we think public ownership of railways is critical for the future, so too do Communists think that public ownership of buses and trams is essential. We get 3.5 billion a year in the Greater West Midlands from the public purse when nearly 18 billion pours into London. Proportionate to population we should be getting three to four times what we currently get. The setting up of the Combined Authority was a sop to local politicians, to give them a spending playground.

We need not only an integrated transport system, we need to find all sorts of new ways to fund, rail, tram, and bus. Let's face it, road traffic congestion comes mainly from car commuting. And that is a problem not so much just in the combined county but in the wider conurbation.

Apparently, business leaders welcomed "tremendous relief" after the leader of Birmingham City Council, John Clancy, ruled out a workplace parking levy in the city. A word of criticism from the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce and they got their way. It seems the council leader personally intervened after business people warned him off. What is this?

One possibility is to get reduced car use in peak periods by enforcing exclusive High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes at pinch points. But it's the congestion charge that will do it, in carrot and stick combination with other things. The area from Hyde Park on the west to the Tower of London on the east is subject to a congestion charge. Transport for London spends its income of over £180 million a year from this on improving public transport.

What about the idea Nottingham City has proposed - the Workplace Parking Levy? Yes, but Nottingham already has three times the per head of population bus use than the average outside of London. The West Midlands is achieving only half the rate that its East Midlands neighbour gets. What's the difference? Nottingham owns its own bus company and is majority shareholder in the consortium running the tram.

More commuting should mean more trains, more frequent and with an obligation to seat everyone, with cheaper season tickets. Resetting the local finance take by innovative taxation, getting people out of single cars, improving air quality- all that has to work alongside a revitalisation of our *local* rail network in the interests of Midlanders.