

# Morning Star

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For peace & socialism

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## Prize-winning peaceniks?

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# BRANSON BACK IN WEST COAST DRIVER'S SEAT

## Ministers hand franchise back to billionaire for up to 13 months

by Tony Patey  
Industrial Reporter

BEARDED billionaire Richard Branson laughed all the way to the bank yesterday with a cobbled-together deal to keep running the nation's busiest and most-lucrative privatised rail line.

Britain's fourth-richest person, who has a stash of £3 billion, was asked to continue managing the West Coast main route while the government sorts out the chaos surrounding the franchise.

Rail unions condemned the entire mess and demanded the government renationalise the whole rail network to restore financial sanity.

RMT leader Bob Crow said: "This announcement is no surprise. Mr Branson and his shareholders are laughing all the way to the bank."

"Not only have they made hundreds of millions from the rail privatisation lottery but they have now

scooped the rollover as well."

Mr Branson's Virgin Trains franchise deal is due to end on December 9 but it is set to be allowed to continue for up to 13 months while a competition is run for an interim franchise agreement.

It comes in the slipstream of an embarrassing U-turn by the Department for Transport (DfT) over the award of a new franchise earlier this month.

Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin cancelled the process after admitting a whole catalogue of mistakes at the DfT and said it'll cost taxpayers £40 million to sort out.

But he placed the blame on civil servants — three were suspended — not ministers.

Virgin has run the line since 1997 but in August the DfT announced that a new 13-year franchise for the London to Scotland line had been awarded to rival privateer First.

Mr Branson challenged the decision in the courts. The DfT claims that it discovered the chaos when it was preparing its defence.

Now a brake has also been put on bidding for three other rail franchises — Great Western, Essex Thameside and Thameslink.

Mr Crow said: "We will continue to fight for public ownership of the railways, a position supported by the vast majority of the British people."

"The government's ideological opposition to it will turn the west coast shambles into franchise anarchy."

"This is pure lunacy and all designed to block the logical and stable option of public ownership."

And TSSA leader Manuel Cortes said: "This decision means that the long-running Whitehall farce, known as private rail franchising, continues at the taxpayer's expense."

"The public continue to subsidise a billionaire to run a railway line which would cost less if it was in the public sector."

"Our Alice-in-Wonderland railway system is beyond the dreams of fiction."

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**FRANCHISE EXTENSION:**  
Virgin Trains owner Richard Branson



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