

Rail strikes on start and end date of Tory conference not political – Aslef

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rain drivers are striking on the start and end dates of the [Conservative Party](#) conference for industrial, not political, reasons, [Aslef](#) general secretary [Mick Whelan](#) has said.

Members of the drivers' union Aslef at 16 train operators in [England](#) are on strike on Saturday, and then again on Wednesday, coinciding with the start and end of the annual autumn Tory conference in Manchester.

Transport Secretary [Mark Harper](#) told Sky News drivers were taking part in a "political strike" aimed at disrupting the conference.

Mr Whelan joined rail workers on a picket line at London Euston station on Saturday morning, alongside a cardboard model of Mr Harper mocked up as the main character from the *Where's Wally?* children's books.

Speaking to the PA news agency, Mr Whelan said: "We've targeted the Tory Party conference, the start date and the finish date of it, not for political reasons but for industrial reasons.

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“To say to Mr Harper: we haven’t seen you since last December.

“Where’s Harper? Where’s Wally? That’s the theme today.”

In a statement from the union, Mr Whelan added: “Those who have, falsely, accused us of targeting events in the past, to hide their own shortcomings, and bad faith, have inspired us to take action on these days (during the Tory Party conference).”

He said Aslef members are “in it for the long haul” and that industrial action “isn’t about a general secretary or a union executive committee”.

“It’s about our members,” Mr Whelan said.

“We will keep on striking to make the voice of our members heard.”

Aslef also staged strikes disrupting travel to the the Tory Party conference last year.

But Mr Harper told Sky News: “The strike this weekend, people can see that it is timed to coincide with the Conservative Party conference, so it is very much a political strike called by the general secretary of Aslef, who sits on the Labour Party’s national executive committee.”

The Conservative Cabinet minister said he had put a “fair and reasonable” pay offer, along with “essential” rail reforms, to Aslef during pay negotiations.

He continued: “An average salary of a train driver today is £60,000 for a 35-hour, four-day week.

“The pay offer that is on the table, if it was accepted, would take that to a £65,000-a-year salary for a four-day, 35-hour week, I think most people would think that is quite reasonable.

“My message is to the union: put the offer to your members and see whether they accept it or not.

“And stop disrupting the general public and actually putting people off using trains, which is not in the long-term interests of the rail industry or their members.”

The 16 companies affected include: Avanti West Coast; Chiltern Railways; c2c; CrossCountry; East Midlands Railway; Greater Anglia; GTR Great Northern Thameslink; Great Western Railway; Island Line; LNER; Northern Trains; Southeastern; Southern/Gatwick Express; South Western Railway; TransPennine Express; and West Midlands Trains.