UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Tracks of Solidarity

Public Opinion and Railway Worker Strikes

Pickering, Steven David; Hansen, Martin Ejnar

DOI
10.1111/irj.70021

Publication date
2026

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Industrial Relations Journal

License
CC BY

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Pickering, S. D., & Hansen, M. E. (2026). Tracks of Solidarity: Public Opinion and Railway Worker Strikes. *Industrial Relations Journal*, *57*(2), 140-149. https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.70021

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:08 Nov 2026

Check for updates

Industrial Relations Journal

WILEY

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Tracks of Solidarity: Public Opinion and Railway Worker Strikes

Steven David Pickering[1] | Martin Ejnar Hansen[2]

[1]University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands | [2]Brunel University of London, Uxbridge, England, UK

Correspondence: Steven David Pickering (s.d.pickering@uva.nl)

Received: 16 June 2025 | **Revised:** 29 October 2025 | **Accepted:** 8 November 2025

Funding: This study was funded by the UKRI/ESRC (grant number ES/W011913/1) and the JSPS (grant number JPJSJRP 20211704).

Keywords: public opinion | railway strikes | regional variance | trades unions

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors influencing public support for railway worker strikes in the United Kingdom. Using a seven-wave survey conducted from December 2022 to October 2023, the paper explores the relationship between public opinion and strike action in the context of British railways. Our analysis considers socioeconomic, political, and geographical factors. Key findings indicate significant variation in support based on political alignment, with right-leaning individuals and those who voted Conservative in the 2019 General Election showing less support for strikes. Surprisingly, proximity to railway stations and income levels did not significantly impact public support. Regional analysis reveals the North East of England, an area with lower rail usage, exhibits higher support for strikes. Furthermore, we find higher levels of support for strikes among ethnic minority groups. This paper contributes to understanding public sentiments on transport strikes, highlighting the complexity of public opinion shaped by political and regional factors. These insights are useful for policymakers and trades unions in addressing the challenges of public transport strikes and their broader societal impacts.

1 | Introduction

A well-developed collective transport system is integral to infrastructure in most modern economies. Railways not only move people, goods and labour; they are also central to climate and sustainability strategies by enabling a shift away from private car use and reducing transport externalities (Budd and Ison 2020; Colding et al. 2022). Maintaining such a system depends on reliable infrastructure and on the stability of the workforce that operates it (Cass and Faulconbridge 2016). In the United Kingdom, however, the railway sector has long been a locus of industrial conflict. Strikes on the London Underground system have become more frequent in recent decades, and the national rail network has experienced recurring disputes that reflect broader changes in strikes and collective bargaining in the UK (Squires 1995; Lyddon 2015).

The Williams' Review on Railways (2019) reported that nearly two-thirds of adults in Great Britain use a train at least once a year. The most frequent users are males in their 30 s with a high household income. Among those who use the trains the least are those in the lowest quintile of income. There is also much variation across the country in how many train trips are taken with the North East having by far the fewest railway user followed by the East Midlands and the South West. In other words, there is much variation in who is using the railways the most. There is also a large number of people who are dependent on the railway to reach their place of work and in general to get around. London is naturally a special case given the importance of the London Underground for commuting in the capital (Tsapakis et al. 2012, 2013).

There is a strong interest in the impact of railway strikes as it has important related effect, such as increasing the congestion

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Industrial Relations Journal* published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

of the road network, and indeed impacting air quality (see e.g., Spyropoulou 2020; Debone et al. 2020; Adler and van Ommeren 2016; Basagaña et al. 2018). Given the importance of railways for many people in Britain and the increased frequency of strike action facing rail users over the past couple of years the question that we explore in this paper is what factors explain support for strike action on the British railways among the British public? This question is central to our understanding of why strike action is called, as it is generally regarded as important for successful strike action to get the backing of the public (Kelloway et al. 2008; Vesper and König 2022; Dong and Tse 2023). Understanding public opinion towards strike action is central not only to the railway unions, but also to transport policy-makers as they in general engage with the public for policy-making (Mogaji and Erkan 2019; Thigpen et al. 2023; Booth and Richardson 2001; Bickerstaff et al. 2002). Yet it appears rare that large-scale surveys are fielded to deal with transport related issues, especially those that might be transitory in impact, albeit repeating on a regular scale (though see Luke and Heyns 2013). If there is a goal to decrease the use of private cars in favour of collective transport such as railways it is necessary to ascertain public opinion regarding railway strike action.

The relationship between strike action and public opinion has long been debated in the industrial relations literature. Hyman (1972) argued that public legitimacy is one dimension of union power, complementing structural and associational resources. In the railway sector, this legitimacy has fluctuated with political climates and leadership strategies. Gregor Gall's (2024) biography of Mick Lynch highlights how Lynch's media interventions represented a strategic exercise of discursive power: a deliberate attempt to reframe strikes as a defence of fairness and public service rather than sectional interest. This contrasts with Bob Crow's earlier "Millwall" stance ("No one likes us, we don't care", sung to the tune of Rod Stewart's "We are sailing") which emphasised strength derived from union density and bargaining leverage rather than public approval. Boyle (2025) similarly identifies Lynch's rhetorical innovation in repositioning railway workers within a moral economy of cost-of-living justice. Our analysis provides an empirical complement to this emerging literature, examining whether such discursive shifts are reflected in public opinion.

To examine this central question, we use a unique survey consisting of six waves of questions asked among adult respondents in England from December 2022 to May 2023 and a seventh wave in October 2023. We test both socioeconomic and political factors in understanding the levels of support for railway strikes, as well as a measure for how close the respondent is to a railway station. Our findings suggest that there are significant differences for strike action depending on sex, age and ethnicity, as well as political left-right placement and vote choice in the 2019 General Election. We also find variation across the regions of England with some being in support of railway strikes and others against them. We find no significant difference of opinion based on income or closeness to a railway station. In the next section we discuss the history of strike action on railways and the link between strikes and public opinion before formulating hypotheses. We will present our data in detail before testing the hypotheses in the analysis and discuss the findings in relation to the relevant literature.

2 | Railways, Strike Action and Public Support

The railway industry, being one of the first to industrialise, also became a fertile ground for labour organising (Kemp 2013). Railway work was both physically demanding and dangerous, leading to a strong shared sense of purpose and identity among workers, which continues to this day (Strangleman 2004; Laniray 2013). Given the nature of railways travelling between cities it meant for a quick spread of unionisation compared to other more localised industries. In the United Kingdom, one of the earliest railway unions was the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), established in 1880. The National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) followed, established in 1913, uniting multiple smaller unions and later merging with the National Union of Seamen to form the RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers) (Darlington 2009). The TSSA (Transport Salaried Staffs' Association) formed in 1897 and is the smallest of the three transport trade unions in the UK.

Throughout the world strikes in the railway sector have often been landmark events, with widespread economic, social, and sometimes even political ramifications. One of the most notable early instances is the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 in the United States, triggered by a 10% wage cut amid an economic depression, the strike quickly spread across multiple states (Stowell 1999). The strike led to greater public awareness about the conditions of railway workers and eventually resulted in improved labour laws, although it took years for substantial changes to be made (Piper 2013). In the UK, the railway strikes in the early 20th century were pivotal with the strikes in 1911, 1919, and notably the General Strike of 1926, involved railway workers as a significant component (Tarran 2004; Harmon 2019). The General Strike of 1926 was more political in nature, in solidarity against the wage reductions and worsening conditions of coal miners, and while the strike itself was called off without meeting its objectives, it demonstrated the immense power that collective action could wield, forcing the British government to take the concerns of the working class more seriously (Harmon 2019; Dukore 2022). The key strikes organised by the railway workers across the world have often been watershed moments in labour history, bringing about significant changes, not just in the railway industry but also influencing broader labour policies and even societal attitudes towards workers' rights (Salvatore 1980). Even today public transport strikes have significant impact on a very large number of people when they are called and they cause widespread disruption for modern societies that rely on the effective public transport provided by railways (Bauernschuster et al. 2017; van Exel and Rietveld 2001).

The issues of wages and job security are reoccurring issues in the realm of labour relations not just within the railway industry, but across multiple sectors (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2021). These issues are often at the core of strike actions and significantly shape the dynamics of labour conflicts (see also Darlington 2009). While low wages are usually the immediate cause that triggers strike actions, they can also serve as a rallying point for broader grievances, including poor working conditions, long working hours, or inadequate benefits although this can vary from sector to sector (Jansson and Uba 2023). This in turn necessitates a greater focus on sector

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

level analysis of strike action (Akkerman 2008). Many strikes in the UK, particularly during periods of economic recession or following World Wars, but also in more recent times, were rooted in disputes over fair wages, and in the past 30 years the privatisation of railways in the UK has increased the level of strike action (MacKinnon et al. 2008; Cumbers et al. 2010; Lyddon 2015).

The 2022–23 rail disputes involved multiple unions (RMT, ASLEF, TSSA) and employers across both Network Rail and train operating companies, with overlapping and at times uncoordinated ballots. The disputes centred on pay, job security, and modernisation, against a backdrop of post-pandemic financial strain and government intervention in negotiations (Hodder and Mustchin 2025; Gall 2024).

The interplay between public opinion and strike action, particularly in the railway sector, is a complex yet crucial aspect of labour relations. Strikes in railways do not operate in a vacuum; they exist in the public sphere and are influenced by, and in turn influence, public perception due to the necessity for changing behaviour during strike action (see also Nguyen-Phuoc et al. 2018; Spyropoulou 2020). The significance of public opinion in the context of strike action is often twofold. On one hand, public support can be a powerful ally for striking workers with sympathy strikes from other sectors, supportive media coverage, and public protests can exert additional pressure on employers and governments to address the grievances of the railway workers (Kelloway et al. 2008; Dong and Tse 2023). Though if the strike is perceived as unjustified or disruptive, public opinion can turn against the workers, thereby weakening their bargaining position (Kelloway et al. 2008). The railway sector is particularly vulnerable to these swings in public opinion due to its high visibility and essential nature, the strong expectation between public consultation and transport policy-making can only exacerbate this problem (Bickerstaff et al. 2002; Booth and Richardson 2001).

While public support is often regarded as advantageous, its necessity is contested. In sectors such as rail, unions may wield considerable structural and associational power independent of public sympathy (Hyman 1972; Darlington 2012). Historically, this has allowed industrial gains even when public opinion was ambivalent or hostile. Yet the 2022–23 disputes also revealed how contemporary union leaders strategically engage with public narratives to enhance legitimacy, using media visibility as a form of *discursive power* (Gall 2024; Boyle 2025). In this sense, the politics of communication now complements the material and organisational power traditionally emphasised in industrial relations theory.

With the established variation of railway use as presented by the Williams Review (2019) it is to be expected that the impact of strike action is felt differently across the country. In areas where there is a strong use of railways we should expect to see less support for rail strikes than where the railways are used more, as there will be more impact on people's lives. This clear link been usage and support is often argued to be of importance for how people perceive strikes and thus also how support for strikes might be measured (Vesper and König 2022). The Williams Review (2019) also argued that the local rail station was often seen as a hub of the community and that a local anchoring was important to understand railway use. Thus, we can present the following two hypotheses:

H1. *Respondents who live in regions that relatively speaking use trains the least are more likely to be supportive of strike action.*

H2. *The closer a respondent live to a train station the more likely they are to support strike action.*

Railway strikes over the past decade in the UK have often been seen as a political struggle. The main rail organisations have always been highly politicised and to some extent radical (Darlington 2009). That trades unions have strong links with left-wing politics and for instance also the Labour party is not new. In fact, this is quite common across most countries that trades unions are linked with left-wing parties. This can create a problem if the political issues are of key importance and overriding the specific issues. We should therefore expect to see differences in attitudes towards strikes based on certain political factors. Two of these are the respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale and whether they voted for the Conservative party at the 2019 British General Election. The Conservative Party is historically seen as anathema to the labour movement. The 2016 Trade Union Act, building on a long line of restrictive legislation dating back to the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, raised the threshold for lawful strike ballots to a 50 per cent turnout and introduced additional hurdles in essential services such as transport. These measures reinforced a broader legacy of state constraint on collective action that continues to shape the political framing of strikes. Whereas their main opponent, the Labour party, has been seen as the supporters of the Labour movement with unions controlling large blocks of voting for the party leadership and indeed party funding. We therefore hypothesise the following:

H3. *The more right-wing the respondent places themselves on a left-right scale the less they support the rail strikes.*

H4. *Respondents who voted for the Conservative Party in the* 2019 *British General Election are less likely to support the rail strikes.*

In the following section we present the data and methodology that we use to test our hypotheses before moving on to the analysis where we will examine the data and present our findings in relation to existing literature and the contextual environment or rail strikes in Britain 2022–23.

3 | Data and Methodology

The data used in this survey come from a series of survey waves collected by YouGov. Full replication code and data are available through the Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UKYKIQ. The survey is restricted to respondents in England and respondents had an age range from 18 to 91. The survey was run from December 2022 to May 2023 with an additional wave in October 2023. The total number of respondents included is 3725. Our dependent variable asks how much

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

the respondent support the rail strikes. To gauge the relative level of support for rail strikes compared to other potential strike action, respondents were given the following statement: "As you may have heard, there are a number of public sector trade unions taking or considering strike action. For each group of workers, please indicate how much you support or oppose strike action." Respondents then ranked their level of support on a seven point scale for the following groups: rail workers, nurses, postal workers, airport workers, primary and secondary school teachers, civil servants, university lecturers and junior doctors. In the survey, a score of one meant "strongly support" while a score of seven meant "strongly oppose." For the purposes of analysis in this paper, we have flipped the scale so that higher numbers mean more support for the strike action.

To test our hypotheses, we include a number of independent variables for our analysis. Apart from one they are all collected through the same survey as the dependent variable. The one variable that is not drawn from the survey measures the distance from the respondent's postcode to the nearest train station. YouGov provides the first half of the postcode (known as the outcode) of all survey respondents. A script was written to take these outcodes and query an open source postcodes API (specifically, https://api.postcodes.io/). This returned the latitude and longitude of those outcodes, which we are using as a proxy for the location of our respondents. This method is not perfect, as our respondents could live at different places within an outcode. Nevertheless, we have confidence in using this measure, as we do not need absolute accuracy; we just need an indication of whether our respondents live near a railway station. We then took a list of the coordinates of all functioning railway stations in the UK, sourced from https://github.com/ellcom/UK-Train-Station-Locations. A further script was written using the haversine formula to take the coordinates of all our respondents and measure the distance to all of the railway stations. For each respondent, the distance to the closest railway station was recorded. We include this variable to ensure that we have a control for the importance of the local rail station as also suggested by the Williams Review (2019). In doing this, we find that most of our respondents live quite close to a railway station; the mean distance is 2.83 kilometres. The furthest that any of our respondents live from a railway station is 26.5 kilometres.

The independent variables coming from the survey are the traditional socioeconomic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, and sector of employment. Given that strikes have a direct political link as discussed earlier we also include variables measuring the respondent's position on the left-right scale, measured from 0 to 10 and a variable indicating whether the respondent voted for the Conservative party at the last General Election in 2019. The descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1 below. As can be seen, there is a slight gender bias in our

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

N	Min age	Max age	Mean age	SD age
3725	18	91	50.42	17.29
		Percentages		
	Women		**Men**	
	54.93		45.07	
		Ethnic minority		
		14.47		
	Urban	**Town and fringe**	**Rural**	
	67.92	8.86	9.72	
Voted Con 2019	**Voted Lab 2019**	**Voted LD 2019**	**Voted Other 2019**	**Vote Unkown 2019**
36.13	25.91	9.21	6.79	21.96
	Left wing	**Middle**	**Right wing**	
	33.48	35.87	30.66	

Region	Percentage
North East	5.13
North West	12.81
Yorkshire and the Humber	10.31
East Midlands	9.61
West Midlands	9.5
East of England	12.27
London	12.78
South East	15.7
South West	11.89

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

respondent base, with notably more women than men. This will be addressed in the formal models. The voting patterns of our respondents are broadly in line with the results of the 2019 general election in England. It should be noted that for over a fifth of our respondents we do not know how they voted. This can be for one of three reasons. First, not all respondents remember how they voted (see Van Elsas et al. 2014; Van Elsas et al. 2016). Second, some respondents did not vote at the 2019 general election (indeed, respondents who are under the age of 22 would not have been old enough to vote in 2019). Third, many respondents like to keep their voting behaviour to themselves, so choose not to tell us.

The left-wing, middle and right-wing measure was based on responses on an 11 point scale. Respondents are asked "In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?". For the sake of Table 1, we have put all respondents giving 0 to 4 as left-wing, respondents giving 5 as middle, and respondents giving 6 to 10 as right wing. Doing so gives three broadly equal categories. We also have respondent rates by region, with the South-East being our most-represented region, whereas the North-East has our fewest respondents.

4 | Results

The long tradition for seeking public support for strike action through picketing and solidarity events is also relevant to the rail strikes in the UK. Given the equally strong tradition of including public opinion in reviews of transport policy and the increased focus on customer experience (Bickerstaff et al. 2002; Booth and Richardson 2001) it makes it even more necessary to understand the levels of public support for strike action.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of levels of opposition and support for railway strikes. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of support or opposition for railway strikes, and in this Figure, the category 1, "strongly oppose" is the single largest category. Indeed, reducing this further to a simple support/oppose division, we find that 39.3% of respondents support rail strikes, 44.75% oppose rail strikes, and 15.95% of respondents are undecided. This distribution is interesting, as it clearly shows that public opinion is quite divided on this issue, as there is a very similar number of people supporting rail strikes as there is to those opposing them.

Figure 2 puts this into some more context. It looks at levels of public support for different groups over time, starting in December 2022 and finishing in October 2023 (no surveys were conducted in the grey box period). Support for strikes by rail workers are represented by the thick green line. As can be seen, rail workers are not the least supported of all groups analysed; proposed strikes by airport workers, civil servants and university lecturers receive notably lower levels of public support. But rail workers do not achieve the levels of public support seen by nurses, junior doctors, postal workers or teachers.

Nurses and teachers tend to attract greater public sympathy than rail workers (see Figure 2). This may reflect perceived moral worth and proximity to care-oriented professions (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2021), whereas transport strikes primarily inconvenience the public. The lower emotional resonance of distributive justice claims in transport compared with health or education disputes could partly explain this pattern. Evidence from related survey research on trust in the NHS (Dorussen et al. 2024) supports this interpretation: healthcare institutions retain exceptionally high public trust even amid performance crises such as long waiting times, suggesting that moral and affective attachment to care professions buffers them from the kinds of legitimacy challenges faced by transport unions.

The fact that public opinion is divided on rail strikes is made starkly apparent in Figure 3. In both of these maps, the black

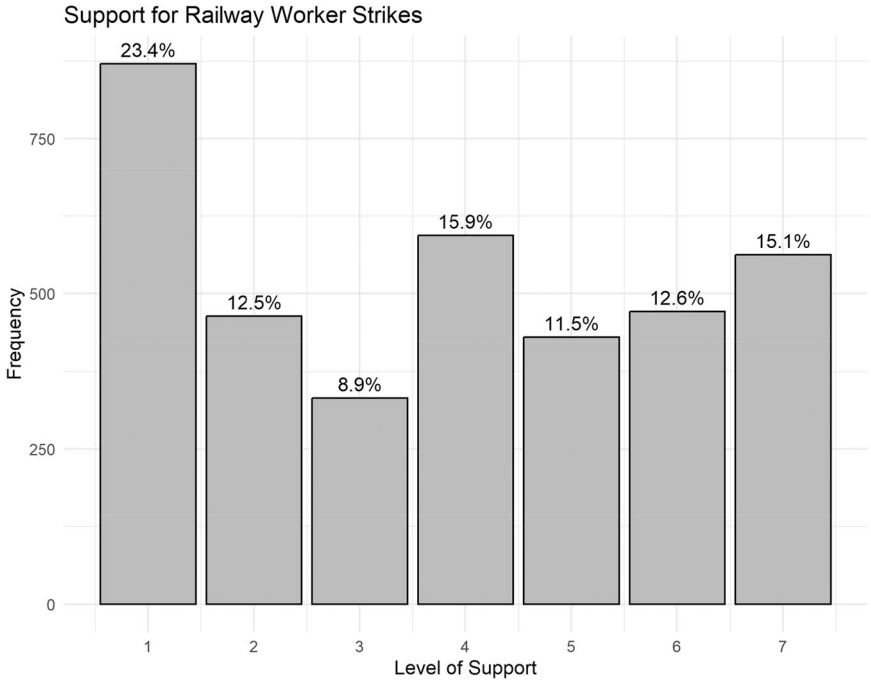

FIGURE 1 | Levels of support for railway strikes.

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

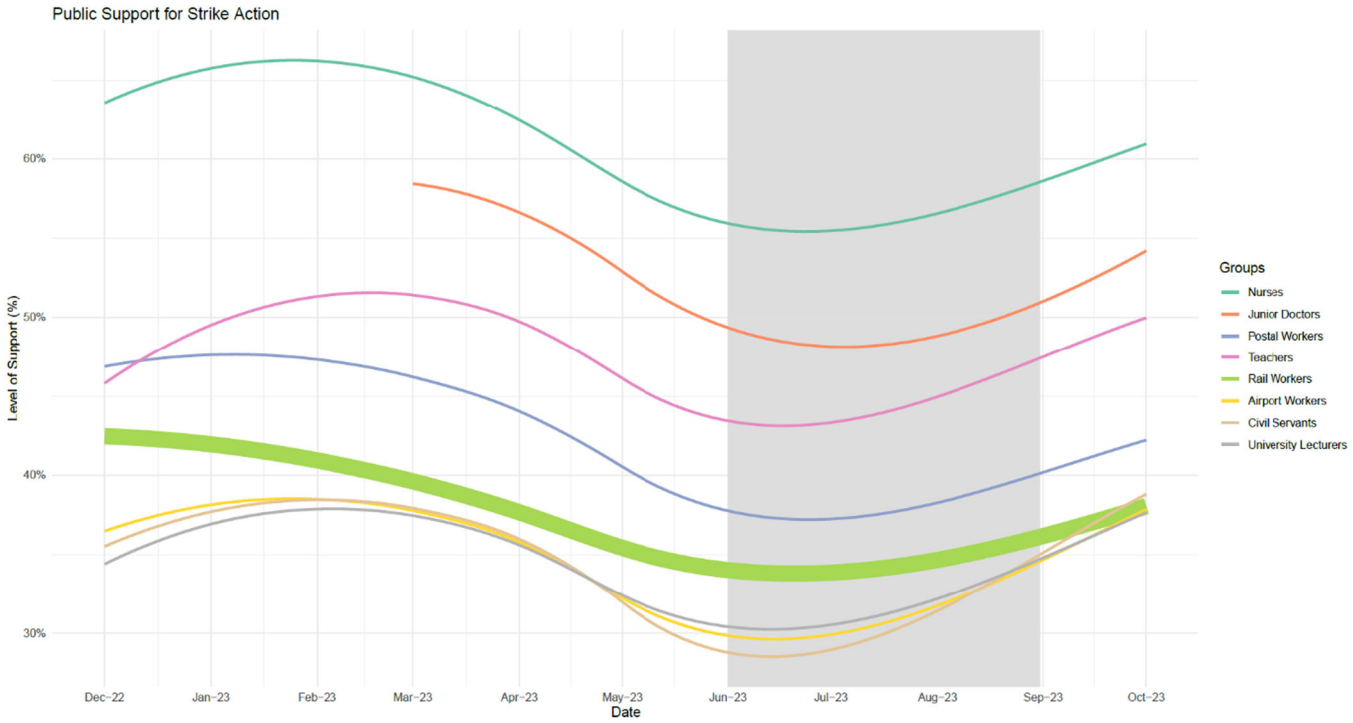

FIGURE 2 | Public support for strike action by different groups.

dots represent railway stations. In the map on the left, the green dots represent respondents who support rail strikes, while in the map on the right, the red dots indicate respondents who are opposed to rail strikes. As can be seen, the distribution appears to be very similar. But as Table 2 makes clear, there is regional variance. In the north-east, almost 50 per cent of respondents support rail strikes, but in the south-east, this drops to 33 per cent. What makes this especially interesting is that when we aggregate how our respondents voted in those regions, we see a very clear negative relationship between voting Conservative and support for rail strikes, and a very clear positive relationship between voting Labour and support for rail strikes.

Despite the less than average support for rail strikes in England there are important lessons to be learnt by delving further into the data and analysing them more in detail. In this manuscript we present three models to increase our understanding of public support for strike action. We first model the relationship without geographical controls, we then include geographical control, before we present a final model with income included as an independent variable. The reason for these separate models is first and foremost that we lose 25% of the observations when income is included and it is important to understand whether this has an impact on our findings. For this analysis it is not the case, the variables do not change in their significance or direction when including income. The results of our regression models can be seen in Table 3 below.

While our dependent variable is constrained between 1 and 7 we use a linear regression for the analysis. We have also performed the analysis presented in this paper using an ordered logistic regression and neither the sign of the effects or the level of significance changes in any meaningful way from the coefficients and significance recovered by using the linear regression models. Additionally, because of the gender bias in our respondents, additional weighted models were tested. Again, these made no difference to the results. Given this we have decided to present the results as unweighted linear models as the interpretation of such models are more straightforward for everyone.

Overall, our models perform well in explaining the variation in the dependent variable. Substantively we find a number of very interesting effects. First, there is very small negative, but significant, effect of age, suggesting that the older a respondent gets the less they support the strikes, although it would take an increase of ten years to get a downwards movement of 0.01 in the levels of support, which is minimal. We find some surprising effects for ethnicity. Our variable is a crude one, we simply contrast people of self-reported "white" background to all other self-reported ethnicities. Here we find that respondents from an ethnic background are significantly more supportive of the rail strikes. There is no evidence that people from such backgrounds should be using the railways more, or should be over-represented in the rail staff (Williams Review 2019), although there is evidence that ethnic background and especially migration status have a significant impact on the choice between air and car travel (Mattioli and Scheiner 2022)

We find no significant impact of respondents are residing in a city or not. There is also no significant effect of income on support for the strikes, which is interesting given the findings of the Williams' Review that people in the lowest income quintile are among the least likely to use rail as a transport mode. Likewise, there is no significant effect of the minimum distance to the nearest rail station, although we acknowledge that this measure is a crude one, but it is the best that it is possible to obtain with the information we have on the respondents. The two political

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

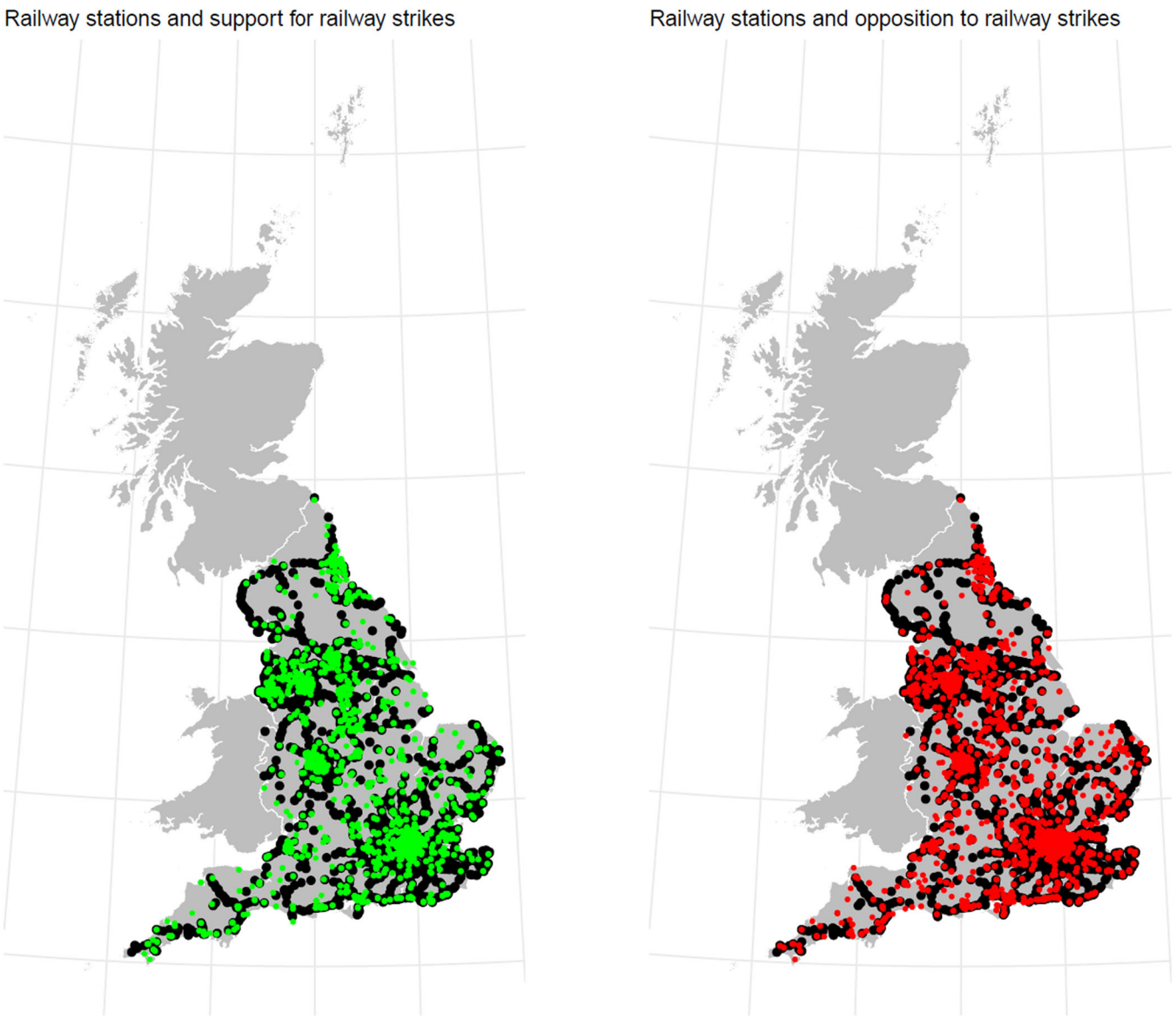

FIGURE 3 | Railway stations and levels of support and opposition to railway strikes.

TABLE 2 | Support for rail strikes and voting behaviour by region.

Region	Support rail strikes	Voted Conservative	Voted Labour
North East	49.21	34.9	48.99
London	47.48	35.03	42.66
North West	45.49	37.83	45.24
East Midlands	40.78	45.33	37.02
Yorkshire and the Humber	40.1	42.2	36.52
East of England	35.23	51.57	29.91
West Midlands	34.75	57.2	28.03
South West	34.09	52.05	22.74
South East	32.82	53.68	20.63

variables that we have included are both significant and in the same direction. The more right-wing a respondent is the less they support the rail strikes, and if a respondent voted for the Conservative party in 2019 they are also significantly less likely to support the strike action, more than a full step on the scale compared to those not voting for the Conservative party. We finally include a variable measuring in which of the nine regions of England the respondent resides. We have here set London as

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

TABLE 3 | Regression analysis of public support for rail strikes.

	Dependent variable: Support for rail strikes		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age	−0.014*** (0.002)	−0.014*** (0.002)	−0.014*** (0.002)
Left-right	−0.363*** (0.018)	−0.360*** (0.018)	−0.357*** (0.021)
Voted Conservative 2019	−1.415*** (0.079)	−1.389*** (0.080)	−1.396*** (0.092)
Women	−0.100 (0.065)	−0.104 (0.065)	−0.125 (0.076)
Ethnic minority	0.172 (0.109)	0.209* (0.112)	0.266** (0.129)
Urban area	0.101 (0.070)	0.105 (0.071)	0.030 (0.082)
Distance to station	−0.009 (0.009)	−0.013 (0.010)	−0.016 (0.011)
Income			−0.042 (0.034)
North East		0.494*** (0.173)	0.403** (0.194)
North West		0.250* (0.131)	0.219 (0.151)
Yorkshire and the Humber		0.123 (0.142)	0.068 (0.163)
East Midlands		0.194 (0.144)	0.127 (0.167)
West Midlands		0.131 (0.144)	0.183 (0.165)
East of England		0.103 (0.136)	0.076 (0.156)
South East		−0.104 (0.125)	−0.195 (0.144)
South West		0.075 (0.136)	0.030 (0.156)
Constant	6.916*** (0.146)	6.824*** (0.171)	7.004*** (0.225)
Observations	2,887	2,887	2,214
Adjusted R^2	0.400	0.403	0.398

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

the reference category given the size, but also the region with the most developed transport system. We find that respondents in the North East are significantly more likely to support the strike action compared to the London respondents. That the North East of England should have a significantly stronger support is perhaps surprising although it is important to note that this is the region where, according to the Williams Review (2019), the least trips with rail are taken.

What our models show is that first and foremost the important factor in determining the level of public support for strike action is not about the particular issue at hand, but fundamentally about politics. This is on the one hand important to note for those in change of transport policy that potential solutions will have to take into consideration the very notably divide especially on partisanship. For the rail union there is also important messages to take home from this, they have a clear public support from people with particular political sympathies and depending on the general standing of the parties in opinion polls it might well inform strategic. However, there are also some trends shown in this analysis that creates a space for contestation. First, ethnic minority support for strike action is strong, which could be a general trend for strike action, although other research does not find a similar effect of ethnicity for other groups engaging in strike action. This might be due to ethnic minority respondents being more dependent on the rail services, although we do not have the data available within our survey to ascertain this. What we are showing here is the necessity to take public opinion seriously when considering transport policy related measures, be it transport types, service levels or in this case strike action. We argue that while there are clear tracks to take to reach solidarity with the strikes, there are equally valid tracks to take to oppose the strikes. What it does not change is that the UK rail services has seen increased strike action over the past couple of years, fundamentally to the detriment of the end-users.

5 | Concluding Remarks

Achieving public support for strike action can be pivotal in the success of labour negotiations, and this is especially true in a high visibility sector such as railways, where industrial action can have immediate, high consequence impacts on people's lives. Public opinion in this sense is a double-edged sword: if the public are sympathetic to the striking workers, this can be used as leverage in negotiations with employers and government. Conversely, if public opinion turns against strike action, then the striking workers will have less influence. To achieve a well-functioning public transport system, and thereby help to achieve environmental goals through lowering the use of cars, we need to better understand the relationship between public opinion and strike action. While support for strikes is not a direct proxy for support for rail investment, understanding these attitudes remains important: public tolerance of disruption may shape the political feasibility of long-term transport investment and the willingness of policymakers to engage with unions as partners rather than adversaries.

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

This paper has made a first empirical attempt to do so. By analysing the results of a large-scale survey, our findings are quite stark: the more right-wing a person is, the less likely they are to support railway strikes, and people who voted Conservative at the 2019 general election are also less likely to support striking railway workers. There is also interesting regional variance, in that the north-east of England, the area with the lowest rail usage, is the area with the highest level of support. Furthermore, ethnicity is related to support for striking rail workers, whereby people identifying as belonging to an ethnic minority are more supportive of railway strikes. Given the importance of a well-ordered transport system to any modern economy, more research is needed on this important area.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Han Dorussen, Naofumi Fujimura, Shun Ikeda, Naoko Matsumura, Jason Reifler, Thomas Scotto, Yosuke Sunahara, Atsushi Tago, Dorothy Yen and Masahiro Zenkyo for their help in grant acquisition and survey development.

Ethics Statement

The Ethical Review Committee of Brunel University London approved this study, reference number 35290-LR-Jan/2022-37313-1.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Full replication data and code are available through the Harvard Dataverse, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UKYKIQ.

References

Adler, M. W., and J. N. van Ommeren. 2016. "Does Public Transit Reduce Car Travel Externalities? Quasi-Natural Experiments' Evidence From Transit Strikes." *Journal of Urban Economics* 92: 106–119.

Akkerman, A. 2008. "Union Competition and Strikes: The Need for Analysis at the Sector Level." *ILR Review* 61, no. 4: 445–459.

Basagaña, X., M. Triguero-Mas, D. Agis, et al. 2018. "Effect of Public Transport Strikes on Air Pollution Levels in Barcelona (Spain)." *Science of the Total Environment* 610–611: 1076–1082.

Bauernschuster, S., T. Hener, and H. Rainer. 2017. "When Labor Disputes Bring Cities to a Standstill: The Impact of Public Transit Strikes on Traffic, Accidents, Air Pollution, and Health." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 9, no. 1: 1–37.

Bickerstaff, K., R. Tolley, and G. Walker. 2002. "Transport Planning and Participation: The Rhetoric and Realities of Public Involvement." *Journal of Transport Geography* 10, no. 1: 61–73.

Booth, C., and T. Richardson. 2001. "Placing the Public in Integrated Transport Planning." *Transport policy* 8, no. 2: 141–149.

Boyle, K. A. 2025. "The Discursive Power of Trade Union Leadership: Framing Identity Fields for Public Persuasion." *Work, Employment and Society* 39, no. 3: 681–702.

Budd, L., and S. Ison. 2020. "Responsible Transport: A Post-COVID Agenda for Transport Policy and Practice." *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 6: 100151.

Cass, N., and J. Faulconbridge. 2016. "Commuting Practices: New Insights into Modal Shift From Theories of Social Practice." *Transport Policy* 45: 1–14.

Colding, J., S. Barthel, R. Ljung, F. Eriksson, and S. Sjöberg. 2022. "Urban Commons and Collective Action to Address Climate Change." *Social Inclusion* 10, no. 1: 103–114.

Cumbers, A., D. MacKinnon, and J. Shaw. 2010. "Labour, Organisational Rescaling and the Politics of Production: Union Renewal in the Privatised Rail Industry." *Work, employment and society* 24, no. 1: 127–144.

Darlington, R. 2009. "Organising, militancy and revitalisation: The case of the RMT union." In *Union revitalisation in advanced economies: Assessing the contribution of union organising*, 83–106. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Darlington, R. 2012. "The Interplay of Structure and Agency Dynamics in Strike Activity." *Employee Relations* 34, no. 5: 518–533.

Debone, D., L. F. L. Leirião, and S. G. E. K. Miraglia. 2020. "Air Quality and Health Impact Assessment of a Truckers' Strike in Sao Paulo State, Brazil: A Case Study." *Urban Climate* 34: 100687.

Dong, K., and Y. K. Tse. 2023. "Examining Public Perceptions of UK Rail Strikes: A Text Analytics Approach Using Twitter Data." *Information Dynamics and Applications* 2, no. 2: 101–114.

Dorussen, H., M. E. Hansen, and S. D. Pickering, et al. 2024. "The Influence of Waiting Times and Sociopolitical Variables on Public Trust in Healthcare: A Cross-Sectional Study of the NHS in England." *Public Health in Practice* 7: 100484. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2024.100484.

Dukore, B. F. 2022. "The British General Strike of 1926." In *Unions, Strikes, Shaw: "The Capitalism of the Proletariat"*, 47–61. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Van Elsas, E. J., R. Lubbe, T. W. G. Van Der Meer, and W. Van Der Brug. 2014. "Vote Recall: A Panel Study on the Mechanisms That Explain Vote Recall Inconsistency." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 26, no. 1: 18–40.

Van Elsas, E. J., E. M. Miltenburg, and T. W. G. van der Meer. 2016. "If I Recall Correctly. An Event History Analysis of Forgetting and Recollecting Past Voting Behavior." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 26, no. 3: 253–272.

van Exel, N. J. A., and P. Rietveld. 2001. "Public Transport Strikes and Traveller Behaviour." *Transport Policy* 8, no. 4: 237–246.

Gall, G. 2024. *Mick Lynch: The Making of a Working-Class Hero*. Manchester University Press.

Harmon, M. D. 2019. "A War of Words: The British Gazette and British Worker During the 1926 General Strike." *Labor History* 60, no. 3: 193–202.

Hertel-Fernandez, A., S. Naidu, and A. Reich. 2021. "Schooled by Strikes? The Effects of Large-Scale Labor Unrest on Mass Attitudes Toward the Labor Movement." *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 1: 73–91.

Hodder, A., and S. Mustchin. 2025. "Measuring the 2022-2023 Strike Wave in Britain: Ballots, Participation and Methodological Implications." *Industrial Relations Journal* 56, no. 1: 46–74.

Hyman, R. 1972. *Strikes*. Fontana/Collins.

Jansson, J., and K. Uba. 2023. "Cycles of Labour Protests: Public and Private Sector Unions' Contentious Actions." *Employee Relations: The International Journal* 45, no. 4: 840–856.

Kelloway, E. K., L. Francis, V. M. Catano, and K. E. Dupré. 2008. "Third-Party Support for Strike Action." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 93, no. 4: 806–817.

Kemp, T. 2013. *Historical patterns of industrialization*. Routledge.

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Laniray, P. 2013. "Professional Identity, Technological Artefacts and Work Practices: The Case of the Train-Driver Community of the National Railway Company." In *Materiality and Space: Organizations, Artefacts and Practices*, 302–323. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Luke, R., and G. Heyns. 2013. "Public Transport Policy and Performance: The Results of a South African Public Opinion Poll." *Journal of transport and supply chain management* 7, no. 1: 1–8.

Lyddon, D. 2015. "The Changing Pattern of UK Strikes, 1964–2014." *Employee Relations* 37, no. 6: 733–745.

MacKinnon, D., A. Cumbers, and J. Shaw. 2008. "Rescaling Employment Relations: Key Outcomes of Change in the Privatised Rail Industry." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 40, no. 6: 1347–1369.

Mattioli, G., and J. Scheiner. 2022. "The Impact of Migration Background, Ethnicity and Social Network Dispersion on Air and Car Travel in the UK." *Travel Behaviour and Society* 27: 65–78.

Mogaji, E., and I. Erkan. 2019. "Insight into Consumer Experience on UK Train Transportation Services." *Travel Behaviour and Society* 14: 21–33.

Nguyen-Phuoc, D. Q., G. Currie, C. De Gruyter, and W. Young. 2018. "How Do Public Transport Users Adjust Their Travel Behaviour If Public Transport Ceases? A Qualitative Study." *Transportation research part F: traffic psychology and behaviour* 54: 1–14.

Piper, J. 2013. "The Great Railroad Strike of 1877: A Catalyst for the American Labor Movement." *History Teacher* 47, no. 1: 93–110.

Salvatore, N. 1980. "Railroad Workers and the Great Strike of 1877: The View From a Small Midwest City." *Labor History* 21, no. 4: 522–545.

Spyropoulou, I. 2020. "Impact of Public Transport Strikes on the Road Network: The Case of Athens." *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice* 132: 651–665.

Squires, M. 1995. "Britain's Rail System-Labour's Achilles' Heel?" *Contemporary Politics* 1, no. 3: 126–133.

Stowell, D. O. 1999. *Streets, railroads, and the great strike of 1877*. University of Chicago Press.

Strangleman, T. 2004. "Creating Railway Culture, 1830–1947." In *Work Identity at the End of the Line? Privatisation and Culture Change in the UK Rail Industry*, 14–42. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Tarran, P. (2004). Britain's railways and the state, 1908-21: origins of the Railways Act, 1921 (Doctoral dissertation, Kingston University).

Thigpen, C., K. Ralph, N. J. Klein, and A. Brown. 2023. "Can Information Increase Support for Transportation Reform? Results from an Experiment." *Transportation* 50, no. 3: 893–912.

Tsapakis, I., B. G. Heydecker, T. Cheng, and B. Anbaroglu. 2013. "How Tube Strikes Affect Macroscopic and Link Travel Times in London." *Transportation Planning and Technology* 36, no. 1: 109–129.

Tsapakis, I., J. Turner, T. Cheng, B. G. Heydecker, A. Emmonds, and A. Bolbol. 2012. "Effects of Tube Strikes on Journey Times in Transport Network of London." *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* 2274, no. 1: 84–92.

Vesper, D., and C. J. König. 2022. "Ever Thought About Strikes? Development of a Scale to Assess Attitudes and Behavioral Reactions to Strikes." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 37, no. 6: 1275–1298.

Williams Review, T. (2019) The user experience of the railway in Great Britain. Evidence paper. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/600eac08e90e071439bb837c/user-experience-railway-in-gb-evidence-paper-document.pdf.

14682338, 2026, 2, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.70021 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [10/04/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License