**Keep East Coast Public**

On 7 March, rail campaigners gathered to protest against government plans to re-privatise the East Coast Main Line, at 16 stations along the line including Durham and Newcastle Central.

The protest coincided with the start of the Lib Dem Spring conference in York. Campaigners called on Lib Dem MPs to raise their voices in opposition to the re-privatisation of the line, and also met passengers to inform them about the campaign and to ask them to contact their MP.

Under public ownership the East Coast Main Line has been a huge success. It  has out performed all other inter-city franchises on performance measures like punctuality and reliability, has the highest passenger satisfaction ratings, receives the lowest public subsidy of all train operators and has won 35 industry awards. The East Coast Main Line demonstrates the benefits of public ownership. By the end of last financial year it would have returned £800m to the taxpayer, all of which will be re-invested in the service, instead of going into the pockets of company shareholders. The public agree with us too. Opinion polls show 58% of all voters want to see East Coast Main Line in public hands.

East Coast shows that publicly owned and operated rail can be a success in the UK. It is a model for the rest to follow. Despite this, the government wants to sell East Coast off to another private train operator. And they are in a hurry, aiming to privatise the service by October 2014. This sell off is unnecessary, financially irresponsible and motivated by a blind faith in the false economy of rail privatisation.

The action for rail campaign is supported by the main transport unions and sadly last week we lost a big figure of the union movement, Bob Crow, General Secretary of the RMT and supporter of this campaign. His legacy will live on in his members and trade union reps, our thought are with his family and friends right now.

He showed strong leadership for his members, he believed in collectivism and believed trade unions are the vehicle by which workers voices can and should be heard.

I had the pleasure of meeting Bob last year; he was a man who fought hard for his members and his principles. I heard him speak at the Durham Miners’ Gala and as always was passionate and inspiring – covering issues ranging from renationalising the railways to decent pay and condition for workers.

Bob always had the interest of members at heart; in our region he joined RMT Churchill Cleaners on the Tyne and Wear Metro in support of their long running campaign for workplace justice during a seven day long strike against poverty pay. As a result of organised labour those cleaners are now on the pathway to a living wage with better terms and conditions.

His loss will be felt across the whole of the union movement, and beyond – he was a good trade unionist and a good man. We need more people like him in public life, just as we need strong unions to balance our democracy.

Beth Farhat – Northern TUC