

Britain needs £32bn High Speed Two go-ahead now, say rail union leaders

Jobs hopes pinned on 250mph railway from London to Birmingham, and later north to Leeds and Manchester

Gwyn Topham and Dan Milmo

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 5 January 2012 21.00 GMT

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Rail union leaders say the government must not give in to opponents of the High Speed Two rail link through the Chilterns. Photograph: Martin Argles for the Guardian

Trade union leaders have given rare backing to the government by urging the approval of plans for a £32bn high speed rail network.

In a letter to the Guardian, leaders of Britain's biggest transport unions argue that with rising unemployment the country urgently needs to invest in infrastructure and must not give in to "wealthy ideological opponents" of the High Speed Two (HS2) scheme linking London to Birmingham – and eventually Leeds and Manchester – with trains running at up to 250mph.

The decision by the transport secretary, Justine Greening, may be announced as early as Tuesday after a postponement last month to make last-minute adjustments to the first phase of the route. Greening is expected to give the go-ahead to the London to Birmingham stage, although the route may be altered after fierce opposition from Conservative-voting constituencies in the Chiltern Hills.

The government is also drawing up plans for the second phase linking Birmingham to Manchester and Leeds. The London-to-Birmingham route is due to launch in 2026, with the northern section following in 2032.

Signatories to the letter include Bob Crow, leader of the largest rail union, the RMT, Manuel Cortes of the TSSA, Mick Whelan of drivers' union Aslef, Len McCluskey of Unite, and Frances O'Grady, deputy general secretary of the TUC.

"As representatives of workers across the rail industries, we welcome the thousands of construction and engineering jobs that HS2 will immediately bring to the UK economy, as well as the jobs it will create in the long-term within the rail industry," they write. "The creation of one million long-term British jobs outside of the south-east rely on the building of HS2."

Rail unions are at loggerheads with the government over a report into cutting industry

costs by Sir Roy McNulty, former chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority, that called for £1bn in costs to be stripped out of the industry by the end of the decade. A new high speed rail network, to add to the London-to-Channel Tunnel High Speed One route, would guarantee a multibillion pound spending spree for the sector amid pressure on the public purse. Last year the government put £4bn into the railways.

The Labour party also backs HS2, although shadow transport secretary Maria Eagle has recently been pushing for a route that would include a hub at Heathrow – the route initially favoured by the Tories.

Greening will be considering construction of an extra £500m tunnel under an area of outstanding natural beauty in the Chilterns to mitigate feared noise pollution and landscape destruction.

Should the current preferred route be given the go-head, campaigners led by Buckinghamshire county council have said they will immediately push for a judicial review. The total cost of the project, including the northern section, will be £32bn.

If Greening gives the go-ahead, construction of the London-to-Birmingham route will be authorised in a parliamentary bill that would receive royal assent in 2015, with building expected to begin the following year. A further bill would be needed for the northern section.

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.