

Great Western franchise not at risk, says DfT

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THE Department for Transport has denied claims by the RMT union that train services currently operated by First Great Western could be at risk, as the deadline approaches for agreeing an emergency franchise extension. The DfT and First Great Western have eight weeks left before the present contract runs out.

The negotiations are necessary as part of the wider replanning of the franchise programme. This is needed following the collapse of the Intercity West Coast competition last year and the franchising delays which followed, while the whole process was reviewed.

The DfT is now faced with the task of agreeing extensions of between two and four years with nearly all the present franchisees, with most long-term contract replacements now set to be pushed beyond the General Election in May 2015.

The RMT is claiming that the process of negotiating an interim three-year extension for First Great Western is 'teetering on the brink of chaos'.

Its general secretary Bob Crow said: "It's no surprise to RMT that the talks with First are in trouble on the Great Western route with the deadline only eight weeks away. It is clear that they are seeking to maximise what they believe is their monopoly provider position to bleed the route for every possible penny to prop up their battered balance sheet regardless of the cost to staff, passengers and the taxpayer alike.

"Despite running a franchise universally slated by passengers for its poor customer service and corner cutting on basic issues like capacity and staffing, First are now looking to drive through the closure of ticket offices, and the sacking of ticket office staff, by trying to force on-line bookings only by lumping financial penalties and threats on those who want, or need, to buy a ticket at the station."

But the DfT responded: "It has been necessary to negotiate a series of direct awards with operators including First Great Western. The Department is continuing to negotiate with FGW and is confident a deal will be reached by October."

First Great Western, too, is remaining confident. A spokesman for FirstGroup described the RMT's claims as 'completely baseless', adding: "We are currently in discussions with the Department for Transport in respect of the extension of the First Great Western franchise, and in accordance with the schedule. For the RMT to suggest otherwise is misleading and incorrect."

However, the DfT has installed a safety net which would keep the trains running. Its own subsidiary Directly Operated Railways has applied for the necessary safety certificates in time to take over in October, should this prove to be necessary.



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