London Underground workers strike

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Thousands of rail workers struck in a dispute related to the Labour government's privatisation of the London Underground.

A ballot of members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union showed 84 percent in favour of action, with 2,471 casting their vote for and only 462 against.

The 48-hour stoppage by station staff, and the minority of train drivers belonging to the union, started on Sunday, June 14. A statement by the union explained: "Last year, in light of speculation about the future of the system, RMT asked London Underground Limited (LUL) for assurances that there would be no compulsory redundancies or worsening of conditions, that the existing bargaining and disciplinary structures would remain and that staff could, if they wished, remain employees of London Underground if work was split between different employers. LUL were asked to agree to introduce a 35-hour week for those staff working more than those hours. The company refused to meet the union on these issues."

In preparation for privatisation the "Company Plan" was implemented in 1991. The intervening period has witnessed downsizing, productivity increases and pay restraint. Between 1994 and 1996 at least 2,000 jobs were eliminated. In the last strike on London Underground, two years ago, the RMT and the train drivers union, ASLEF, refused to call for unified action by all underground staff, calling strikes on different days. This division is maintained in the current dispute as ASLEF is not supporting the two-day stoppage by RMT members.

Private operators who win the franchises on offer to run London Underground will seek the earliest return on investment to maximise their profit margins. The RMT's main concern is that this will undermine the negotiating machinery through which they have traditionally worked with management. In calling industrial action, the union is seeking to retain its position at the bargaining table within the new arrangements, but does not oppose privatisation in principle.

A long-time worker on the district line explained why he and his colleagues are supporting the strike action. "We do not know exactly which sections of the underground will be privately run; it will be used to split all the workers. And there is one thing that we can be sure of: privatisation will mean that the only concern of the companies will be making profit. To make profits they will be destroying our jobs and conditions. This is what has happened at British Rail and we must fight this."

The Labour government has been anxious to play down the significance of its privatisation of the capital's subway, the last major mass transit system remaining in the public sector. In unveiling the government's plans in March, John Prescott, the deputy prime minister, stated that the restructuring was "not privatisation, not nationalisation, but a radical, new third way."

Prescott announced proposals to attract £7 billion of private investment over 15 years from the year 2000. This will involve contracting out the track, tunnels, signalling, stations and rolling stock. Up to three separate infrastructure contracts will be awarded, though Prescott explained that it could all be awarded to a single company if the bid were competitive enough. Keeping the train service in government hands has been presented as a way of curbing the worst excesses of the private operators. But annual profits of £200 million are the more probable reason.

The Government has indicated that it will increase its grant to the London Underground by £365 million over the next two years. This will be spent on routine maintenance such as track renewal, tunnel relining and drainage repairs before they are hived-off to the private

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sector, ensuring that city speculators are able to make a rapid return on their investment.

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