

London Jubilee Line strike ends

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Striking electricians voted Friday November 27 to accept a peace plan aimed at settling the two-week unofficial stoppage on the Jubilee Line extension to the London Underground.

The dispute began ten days ago when 12 workers were transferred from the London Bridge site after speaking out on questions of health and safety. Management claimed the decision to transfer the workers was based solely on productivity considerations, but this was strongly denied by workers picketing the Jubilee site. Workers who spoke to *WSWS* asked that they not be named due to the threat of victimisation. One said:

'The health and safety issue was over the fire alarms. There was an inadequate fire alarm system throughout the tunnels in the underground system at London Bridge, where we are installing the new electrical system. Eleven lads and the safety officer spoke out against this and management wanted to transfer them off the site down to Green Park.

'They claimed they wanted to transfer these 11 lads off to another site for productivity reasons, which wasn't the case. They transferred them because they voiced concerns over health and safety and that the fire alarm system is inadequate.'

The incident occurred after workers emerged from below ground to find the area deserted of all but Emergency Services. They were told that fire alarms had sounded, but they didn't hear it. When the safety rep reported this, the men refused to work until adequate alarms were installed. When the employer Drake & Skull's responded by transferring the rep and 11 other workers from the site, a series of mass meetings were organised, leading to 600 electricians at London Bridge, Waterloo and Westminster sites taking indefinite strike action until the Jubilee 12 were reinstated.

The deal accepted Friday wins reinstatement of the

12, but with an undertaking on the part of the stewards that there will be no more unofficial stoppages. Management will have the right to transfer workers after giving proper notice. This amounts to a no-strike deal, under conditions where the striking electricians were opposed by their union, the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU). The AEEU disowned the strike and instructed the men to return to work. The workforce rejected this, but the union remained in control of negotiations and secured an 'unreserved commitment' from stewards that there would be no more unofficial action.

The political sensitivity of the dispute was highlighted when Prime Minister Tony Blair intervened, demanding that management must be 'allowed to get on and do their job'. The Jubilee Line extension is being built to link the Millennium Dome to central London and is to carry over half of the 12 million people expected to visit the dome in Greenwich in the year 2000.

Transport chiefs have been criticised by MPs after setting a new deadline of October 1999 for completion, with trains not beginning to run until 11 days before the dome is due to open. Denis Tunnicliffe, Chief Executive of London Transport (LT), which is responsible for the Jubilee Line extension, was called before a Commons Select Committee and criticised for not having contingency plans in the event of the line not opening in time.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott removed LT from direct management of the construction project last summer and brought in the US construction giant Bechtel, which is said to have a 'reputation for letting nothing get in its way'. Since the takeover workers complain of an increasing productivity drive at the expense of health and safety.

'Bechtel get a £1 million bonus if they get the job done on time and how many lives are we going to lose?'

Bechtel has overtaken the project and are getting big bonuses. By the looks of it they are going to cut corners and get it out whatever way they can. As far as I am concerned they seem to have a bit of a dirty tricks campaign going on against us,' one of the strikers said.

Predictably the tabloid press ran articles complaining of 'industrial gangsterism', 'wreckers' and 'outside troublemakers' surrounded by 'burly pickets'. The *Mail on Sunday* went so far as to publish a photo-montage which took a known militant from a previous dispute in Manchester and super-imposed him onto a recent picture of a picket line at London Bridge.

Even more concerning are the innuendoes from the press that the electricians have been involved in sabotage. Site managers have claimed that repairing hacked cables will set the £2.8 billion project back a further £100,000 and take months to repair. British Transport Police have been called in to interview workers. London Underground said the incidents started several months ago and were in areas not accessible to members of the public. Pickets deny any responsibility for the incidents:

'The lads didn't work the weekend and haven't been working the last five or six weekends due to the 48 hour [European] directive. So they were not in on Saturday or Sunday. From the Monday we weren't in because the strike began. Tuesday we were still on strike and on Wednesday they suddenly found sabotage in a fire alarm panel that you need a permit and a key to gain entry to.

'The allegation is that the electricians are to blame for that, but they haven't got any proof. That's not even our work. They claim the police are investigating it. Some people are saying that the management of Bechtel have sabotaged it themselves to avoid being penalised for missing deadlines. We will have to wait and see when the police prove who has done this sabotage, but like I said before you need a key and a permit to get into those areas and we don't have them.'

Another worker explained that there had been a consistent productivity drive since the site began. The press cites workers earning over £1,000 a week and working at only 25 percent of what they are capable of. In reality they are paid £400 for a 48-hour week. 'I come out with about £350 a week after travel expenses for working in a four-foot by four-foot hole surrounded by rats for 48 hours a week.' He explained that this was

not the first dispute on the site:

'There was another dispute early on in the construction of the line in April-May last year over the sacking of the shop stewards. They had formed a shop down in Greenwich and within a week management had wiped them all out. They sacked them all so we went on strike and got them all reinstated. It went to arbitration and they were beat on all nine accounts. They won't go to arbitration because they know they are wrong again. We are prepared to go to arbitration and see what happens with the outcome. We know we are going to win it because it is about health and safety'.

The AEEU brokered deal was rejected by management on Tuesday, only to be accepted two days later after political pressure was brought to bare to get the dispute off the agenda. As the millennium approaches, workers can expect even greater productivity increases and attacks on health and safety. Resistance will require a rejection of the undertakings given by their stewards.

See Also:

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