

# Two-day strike on London Underground

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Thousands of London rail workers are to take strike action against the threat to jobs, pay and conditions posed by the Labour government's partial privatisation of the city's Underground network.

A ballot of Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) members returned an 85 percent majority for strike action--2,489 in favour with 436 against. A two-day strike will commence from 6 p.m. on Sunday, February 14 until the same time on Tuesday, February 16. The RMT covers most station staff and half the total number of train drivers.

The action was announced when talks between management and the union broke down after only two hours. London Underground Limited (LUL) refused to give any assurances about the impact of the partial sell-off on employees' terms and conditions.

This is the latest development in an ongoing dispute that caused several stoppages last year. A scheduled strike for New Year's Eve was called off on December 22 when LUL secured a High Court injunction outlawing the action.

The overwhelming support for the strike is largely influenced by tube workers' awareness of the adverse effects that privatisation has had on other public sector workers, particularly those employed in transport. After pay and conditions deteriorated since London Buses was privatised five years ago, many workers have transferred to other transit companies.

The Underground workers' demand for job security has drawn much venom from corporate representatives and the media. Robert Gordon Clark, deputy chief executive of the business consortium London First stated, "This is a shameful attempt to derail the government's plans and scare off business from investing in the capital's Tube system."

The *Evening Standard* ran an article headlined "Scandal of Tube Strikers".

The government's plan for privatising signalling,

track, tunnelling, stations and rolling stock involves contracts being awarded to the private sector on leases of up to 30 years. One leading bidder, Railtrack, has proposed a contract of 90 years. Guarantees over jobs and standard rates of pay are seen as an impediment to attracting corporations aiming to get the maximum profits from the venture. Although the structure for the sell-off is to be in place by April of next year, private contractors have already begun to take over certain aspects of the subway system. The first day of the strike will coincide with the deadline for maintenance workers for the Underground Ticketing System to sign contracts with their new employers, the consortium Transys. LUL management have already stated that maintenance workers who refuse to sign will be deemed to have terminated their employment.

Leaks have also appeared in the press that the government is reconsidering selling the train service as well. This forms part of a plan to float Britain's entire traffic control service next year, which is intended to raise £1 billion.

Nomura International, the acquisitions arm of the Japanese investment bank, has been named as an interested party in both bids. Nomura has set up a £1 billion joint fund with the Serco Group, an international project management business, to take over and run public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the UK and similar ventures abroad. Nomura already financed the take-over of Angel Trains, the largest of the UK rolling stock companies created when British Rail was sold off under the Tory government.



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