

# Strike looms over safety on London Underground following privatisation

**Tony Robson**  
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Workers on the London Underground (LU) are balloting for strike action over the threat posed to safety by the Labour government's partial privatisation of the network.

Negotiations between management and the two main unions on LU—the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (Aslef)—broke down on January 3. Management had failed to give an undertaking that there would not be a lowering of safety standards once the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) comes into effect on March 31.

The results of the vote will be announced later this month, but previous ballots by the RMT have produced clear results in favour of industrial action, and it is thought that the latest will also return a majority in favour of a strike. Two days of industrial action in February 1999 caused considerable disruption but failed to close the network.

The RMT and Aslef ballot covers approximately 9,000 LU employees. The RMT represents general staff grades and also covers around 50 percent of LU drivers, whilst Aslef is the traditional union for train drivers. Joint action would have a major impact, particularly in central London as one million commuters a day use the underground.

Among the preferred bidders under PPP to run the 30-year contracts for infrastructure maintenance on the Underground are companies who have been implicated in disasters on the country's privatised railway network. Balfour Beatty Rail Maintenance, a member of one consortium shortlisted last May, is among the private operators responsible for the recent derailment at Hatfield which claimed four lives.

Even government rail inspectors have rejected London Underground's safety case for PPP. Peter Hornsby, principal inspector for the Health and Safety Executive, wrote to LU on January 12 airing fears over driving, signal operation and track maintenance amongst others,

stating: "It is not clear who does what, how and when."

Despite this refusal to give a health and safety approval to PPP, Hornsby has waved the customary requirement that entirely new safety plans be submitted, on the pretext that there is insufficient time.

The undertakings sought by the RMT and ASLEF from management and the infrastructure companies (Infracos) included:

- \* The establishment of a joint body between the unions, LU and the Infracos to ensure that safety is maintained when using external contractors and sub contractors to carry out maintenance and renewals.

- \* No compulsory redundancies.

- \* Workers' terms and conditions should not be undermined to the detriment of safety.

Although the workforce are adamantly opposed to PPP on the grounds that it will undermine their safety, as well as that of general public, and threaten existing working conditions, union demands are aimed solely at preserving the union bureaucracy's niche within the LU operation.

Over an extended period LU has contracted out work to private companies, mainly in the engineering section. This has led to major job losses, with the workforce being reduced by a quarter between 1985 and 1999. Restructuring of terms and conditions has led to a loss of entitlements and the lengthening of the working day. The RMT has gone along with all of these changes.

Even when faced with a clear threat to safety through the introduction of PPP, the RMT and Aslef have refused to tie any industrial action to defeating privatisation plans. The unions say that were they to do so, the strike would be deemed "political" and therefore illegal under Tory anti-union legislation kept on the statute books by New Labour.

But the union's refusal to challenge the undemocratic anti-union laws is bound up with their own desire to avoid any action that could arouse a broader questioning of the

profit motive and the extension of the market into the public sector.

At a joint union rally on January 8, the Assistant General Secretary of the RMT stated that the strike was about “fragmentation not privatisation”. He went on, “We have always worked with the private sector, i.e. when we need new investment. The private sector will have to do this, I do not have a hang up about this.”

The union's slogan “safety is not negotiable” is belied by their support for London Mayor Ken Livingstone's bond scheme proposal for financing the Underground. Unlike the government's plans to separate the basic infrastructure from the operation of the trains, Livingstone proposes keeping a unified network, but he still envisages a major role for outsourcing work to private contractors. The need to satisfy private financial investors through a bond scheme also means that profit not public service will be the order of the day.

The unions have also maintained a conspicuous silence over the inflated salary of Bob Kiley, who last week took up his post as the new Commissioner for Transport overseeing the Underground. The November edition of *RMT News* carries a report conducted by the TUC into the growing pay gap between the highest paid directors and their workforce. It cites figures showing that directors' pay has grown from 15.7 times that of the average company employee in 1994 to 20.7 today.

However, in a page devoted to the appointment of Kiley it quotes Livingstone's comment that "his high salary is a reflection of the fact that whether you're in the public or private sector, if you want to recruit the best person for the job, you have to provide a package that can compete internationally."

This passes without comment even though Kiley's £500,000 per annum salary is approximately 28 times that of an Underground station assistant and 18 times that of a train driver.



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