

London Underground hit by drivers' strike

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London Underground was brought to a virtual standstill on Monday by striking train drivers. Ninety-two percent of the network was closed, with no trains at all on six of 12 lines. Just 40 of the usual 476 trains in service ran. The Underground, or "Tube," is a vital component of the capital's public transit system, and carries an average of 2.5 million passenger journeys each day.

The 24-hour stoppage, which began Sunday at 17.30 GMT, was the first of three one-day strikes over the adverse effects on safety and jobs that will result from the proposed privatisation of the Underground rail network by the Labour government.

The strike had been originally called by the two main unions covering Underground drivers—the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (Aslef) and the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT)—after a ballot for industrial action returned an overwhelming majority in favour. However, joint action was prevented after London Underground (LU) management successfully won a High Court injunction last week against the RMT. In court, LU management argued that the RMT had not complied with stringent anti-union legislation. They claimed the union had failed to supply them with information pertaining to the numbers of staff participating in the action, and their work location on the Underground. Jeffrey Burke QC, representing LU, told the court, "The purpose of the requirement is to help the employer make plans so as to avoid or reduce the impact of the proposed industrial action." LU made clear that if the strike went ahead, the RMT would be made liable for £3 million of damages for each day of disruption.

The court ruling against the union by Justice Gibbs demonstrates the draconian nature of Britain's labour laws, which were introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government and kept in place by Labour. In compliance with the rules governing industrial

disputes the RMT had held a secret ballot and given the company the required period of advance notice. Even so, just one representative of the judiciary was able to overrule a ballot that had returned a nine to one majority in favour of strike action.

The RMT immediately acquiesced. A circular was sent out to union members on behalf of General Secretary Jimmy Knapp, instructing them not to participate in the strike. The union is to appeal against the ruling; otherwise it will have to re-ballot its members before commencing any industrial action.

Aslef, whose members went ahead with their strike on Monday, is expected to continue with the remaining 24-hour stoppages scheduled for February 12 and 19.

The response of London Mayor Ken Livingstone to the High Court ruling was also instructive. Livingstone had made opposition to the government's Public-Private Partnership (PPP) plans for hiving off the Underground central to his campaign for election as London Mayor in May 2000, condemning it as a form of privatisation that would be detrimental to the safety of LU workers and passengers alike. The issue played a significant role in Livingstone's victory—standing as an independent—over the official Labour candidate in the mayoral contest, Frank Dobson.

Only the last month, Livingstone appeared on the platform of a joint rally organised by RMT and Aslef, pledging to join drivers on the picket lines during their strike. But Livingstone has used the unpopularity of PPP to increase his political influence with government and big business. He has built up significant corporate support for his "bond scheme"—an alternative means of raising private capital for the Underground—increasing the pressure on Labour to drop their original plans.

With the Underground strike threatening to widen public opposition to the government's privatisation scheme, Blair and Livingstone appear to have agreed some form of trade-off. In the same week the High

Court ruled against RMT participating in the industrial action, Labour announced that Bob Kiley—Livingstone's Transport Commissioner—had been placed in charge of redrafting government proposals for PPP. The announcement followed two days of negotiations between Kiley and Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, who is also in charge of the Department of Transport. In a press conference, Prescott explained that Kiley "will be working closely with the government and London Underground" to modify PPP.

This comes only weeks before the announcement was to be made regarding which companies have won the contracts to run the newly privatised infrastructure; and this process has now been suspended. The government is reported to have given Kiley access to all the documents pertaining to the negotiations over PPP and he has been entrusted with redrawing the tenders and contracts.

Kiley's modified proposals are to be submitted at the end of the month. He has already made clear that he agrees with the government on the core issue of allowing a major role for the private sector in running the Tube. Where Kiley differs with the government's original plans is on dividing the Underground's infrastructure into three segments, to be run by separate private consortia on 30-year contracts.

The Transport Commissioners' proposals are expected to allow for long-term contracts with the private sector but under the unified managerial supervision of LU. Whilst supposedly preventing the network's fragmentation, the alternative plan still allows for the separation of the maintenance of the track and signalling from the running of the trains.

In return for this co-operation Kiley has stated that his earlier proposal to raise funds through a bond scheme has been dropped.

As for Livingstone's pledge to join Monday's picket lines—luckily for him, he was outside the capital for most of the day and so did not have to make good on his promise. Even the remotest association with workers' grievances over privatisation is viewed as cutting across the rapprochement agreed between the mayor, government and big business.

Livingstone has made clear that his agreement with the government about the Underground will have wider political significance for Labour. Earlier this year, the Mayor had threatened to make privatisation a "live

issue" during the upcoming general elections—taunting the government with the spectacle of more of its candidates being defeated on the issue. Speaking after the deal between Prescott and Kiley had been announced, Livingstone spelt out that the "massively difficult, divisive issue that could have rumbled on through the election campaign...has been resolved."

The RMT and Aslef supported Livingstone's election for Mayor, claiming LU would be safe in his hands, and have subsequently refused to criticise his actions. The union bureaucracy is busy working out its own trade off, vowing to continue with industrial action but stipulating that it will be not directed against PPP per se. While Underground workers have seized upon the opportunity to demonstrate their opposition to privatisation, the unions have restricted this to demands of the most minimal character, and above all to protect their role in the negotiating process. They consist of seeking assurances that no redundancies carried out under PPP will be compulsory and that a joint management-union board be established to oversee safety amongst the private operators.



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