London Underground hit by second strike against privatisation

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London Underground was hit by the second strike in as many months on Thursday March 29. The action was taken by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) against the undermining of safety and threat to jobs posed by the Labour government's privatisation of the London Underground under the Public-Private Partnership (PPP). The general union's membership covers 40 percent of train operators, 80 percent of station staff and all signalling and infrastructure workers.

The twenty-four hour stoppage, which started the previous evening, had its greatest impact on the following morning's peak traffic. One estimate put the number of trains running at only 30 out of the usual 500. Nine of the network's twelve lines were totally shut down.

The ballot of RMT members had returned the largest majority for strike action ever recorded in the history of London Underground—by 11 to 1. That so few trains were running is also a measure of the degree to which the picket lines were respected by ASLEF members, the main union for train operators. On the Circle Line and Hammersmith and City—where ASLEF members constitute the majority of train operators—there was no service.

This level of solidarity is in contrast with the official leadership of both unions. While they announced a joint campaign against PPP—with unified strike action spread over three twenty-four hour stoppages—this has not materialised. The RMT pulled out of the last one day strike on February 5 after legal action was taken by London Underground Limited (LUL) management. This time round it was the turn of ASLEF. The law courts had outlawed the previous RMT strike, which was supported by a 9 to 1 majority, on the basis of a technicality. The strike was deemed in breach of current labour regulations because the union had not provided details of the number of members, listed by grade and location, who were to take part.

This rule was brought in by the Labour government last September and represents a further erosion of workers rights. It strengthened that part of the anti-strike laws that enables employers to make contingency plans when faced with industrial action.

ASLEF were not initially targeted for legal action because London Underground claimed that they could more readily identify their members because their subscriptions were made through the pay roll. However the High Court judge had said that the union was also in breach of the law. ASLEF's climbdown is thought to be have been a response to a decision by management to proceed with legal action against the union.

A circular from Jimmy Knapp, RMT General Secretary, states, “As you can see no progress has been made. Indeed we have been informed that the primary reason ASLEF called off its strike is because they were threatened with legal action. This has arisen from the previous court decision against the RMT, which said that ASLEF's ballot was in breach of the law although at that time LUL chose not to take action against ASLEF.”

While the opposition of tube workers to privatisation is manifestly clear, both unions have restricted their dispute to a demand that management meet certain conditions before privatisation can proceed.

After the strike in February both unions portrayed an agreement to establish a joint union-management committee with the “infracos” (private infrastructure companies) to oversee safety standards as a major breakthrough. Since then management have refused to give any undertaking that there will be no compulsory redundancies or redeployment of staff. The RMT and

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ASLEF are pinning their hopes on a compromise being reached between the Labour government and London Mayor, Ken Livingstone, over the final shape of privatisation. Negotiations have been mediated through the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott and Bob Kiley, Commissioner for Transport. Kiley, a Livingstone appointee, had agreed to oversee the privatisation program on the proviso that a unified management structure was retained and the operation of the trains was not separated from the maintenance of the infrastructure. These negotiations have now broken down.

The *Evening Standard* attempted to whip up a backlash against strikers with provocative headlines such as “Rage against Tube strikers”, but this failed to have the desired effect. Despite the disruption caused to the 2.6 million passengers who use the service daily, there was widespread sympathy with the strike. Most Londoners view it as a defence of safety, which privatisation would undermine. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have criticised London Underground's preparation for privatisation. In a February report sent to LUL, the HSE outlines 69 outstanding safety issues. These include areas such as “ insufficient detail to prevent risks from overcrowding at stations”, inadequate assessment of the risks to staff and evacuation of stations.

On the day of the strike, a report was produced by the House of Commons environment, transport and regional affairs committee, which contained many criticisms of Railtrack, the private infrastructure company responsible for maintenance of the national rail tracks since privatisation. It described Railtrack's management of contractors as “ woeful ” and said its past performance was “seriously inadequate.”

See Also:

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[7 February 2001]

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