

Union calls off strike against privatisation of London's Underground rail network

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Rail workers have had their vote for strike action against the part privatisation of London's Underground network overturned for a second time.

In February, a nine-to-one majority vote for a 24-hour stoppage by 7,500 members of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) was outlawed by the High Court, which ruled that the stringent criteria of the anti-strike laws had not been met.

Now, an even larger majority of 11-to-one was overturned by the RMT executive, who cancelled a planned one-day strike on May 3 only four hours before the stoppage was due to begin. The union leaders said that the action should not go ahead so as to facilitate discussions with management, even though their current offer does not meet workers' demands. The RMT has said strike action could take place on May 15.

Very few Tube workers received news of the cancellation directly from the RMT—only hearing of the decision on TV or in the newspapers. For others, the news was relayed via a phone call from management instructing them to report to work. Workers were left with little or no information on why their strike had been called off, and some stayed away from work.

Union leaders utilised the resulting confusion to claim that they had won a major concession from London Underground, the guarantee of job security following the planned partial privatisation under the government's Public Private Partnership (PPP). However, this claim has proved to be groundless.

Alongside the drivers' union ASLEF, the RMT had held negotiations with London Underground management through the ACAS arbitration body. During talks held between April 30 and May 1, a draft joint agreement had been put forward. This did not rule out compulsory redundancies, but stated that in order to avoid them, unions and management would jointly: "Develop a mechanism to deal with surplus staff if voluntary processes do not work with a guarantee of at least one alternative job offer."

After 18 hours of discussions the RMT announced late on May 1 that the strike would proceed, as management had not given the undertakings they required. The union has attempted to justify its subsequent decision to call off the strike by asserting there was further clarification of the redeployment policy by management. The RMT has presented two management documents in a favourable light: the first,

describes how the process of redeployment will operate. It states, "Once a suitable alternative vacancy is found, the displaced employee is offered this job. If they reject a vacancy they need to explain why they do so and demonstrate how this is not a suitable vacancy to remain with the Company, and be subject to any further such offers. However, if this is not demonstrated the Company is not obliged to make any further job offers."

The accompanying correspondence explains that there is no limit to the number of times this procedure can be applied, and that until a full time position is found, the displaced employee can be placed in a temporary job. In one scenario it describes the following example: "an employee works in London Underground in a permanent contract and is displaced. The employee concerned is redeployed to a suitable alternative job inside London Underground. Six months later, this employee is transferred to an Infraco [a consortium of private companies running part of the rail infrastructure], where within four months he is displaced again. The Infraco then redeploys this employee to another suitable vacancy and he continues to work in a permanent capacity in the new job..."

The second document states that if an employee working for an Infraco is made redundant they can be offered redeployment to any of the Infraco's working on London Underground. The RMT claimed that this was a breakthrough; as for the first time it covered the 6,000 workers who face being transferred over to the private sector following PPP.

Rather than winning job security, the unions are instead creating a transient workforce who face redundancy if they do not accept complete flexibility. The draft joint agreement stipulates that in return for such "job security" the unions must co-operate with the "introduction of organisational change and new working arrangements."

Based upon this, the RMT executive voted four-to-three to call off the dispute. Assistant General Secretary Bob Crow played a key role in having the strike called off.

There has been concerted effort by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) on behalf of the Labour government to halt opposition to PPP. During the ACAS talks, TUC General Secretary John Monks wrote directly to RMT Assistant General Secretary Vernon Hince stating, "I would formally request the

RMT executive committee to suspend the industrial action.”

The *Evening Standard* newspaper, whose headline on Wednesday May 2 ran, "TUC attacks tube strikers", seized upon Monks' efforts. The paper had derided Tube workers as “antediluvian” for fighting to protect their jobs, dismissing concerns over the threat to safety posed by PPP as mere scare-mongering and dubbing the action a “jobs for life” strike.

On the very evening the strike action was due to start, the government announced the names of two of their preferred bidders to run the deep tunnel line sections for the next 30 years. Both these consortia include companies that have been implicated in the worst disasters to occur on the national railways since it was privatised in the early nineties: The Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly (JNP) Infraco is to become “Tubelines”. This consortium includes Amey—the firm responsible for the signalling around London's Paddington station—in charge of the maintenance of the poorly sighted signal SN109 responsible for the collision of two trains in 1999, which claimed the lives of 31 passengers.

The Bakerloo, Circle and Victoria (BCV) Infraco is to become “Metronet”. The main firm in this consortium is Balfour Beatty, responsible for failing to replace the cracked rail at Hatfield that caused the derailment of a train last October, killing four passengers. Balfour has also been implicated in several other rail safety violations, including the collapse of a tunnel at Heathrow in 1994.

The Underground unions had promised a joint campaign against the threat PPP posed to safety and jobs. Despite their members voting for joint strike action on three occasions in February, the leadership of both unions ensured it did not take place. The RMT withdrew from the first strike following the threat of legal action. By the time they re-balloted their membership and took action, ASLEF had overruled a 75 percent majority and called off industrial action, claiming that management had met their demands. The two days of strike action that have taken place and that closed down most of the network have been the result of unofficial action, as the rank and file of both unions refused to cross each other's picket lines.

For Tube workers, the strikes were seen primarily as a means to stop PPP. But the unions have always refused to make this their explicit aim. This was not solely to avoid defying the anti-strike laws forbidding industrial action of a “political” nature. From the outset, the unions have accepted that the private sector would be given a greater role in the Underground network; they differed only over the form through which this would take place.

Token industrial action has been combined with political support for London Mayor Ken Livingstone's proposals for a “bond scheme” instead of PPP. However, Livingstone described the bond scheme proposal as the “son of PPP,” and his alternative is designed to enable the government to retreat from implementing PPP in its present form, whilst not departing from its essential agenda. Proponents of the bond

scheme have argued that it is less expensive and still allows for a large amount of outsourcing—thus complying with the government's tight budgetary policies and its strategic aim of extending the private sector into public services.

The appointment of Bob Kiley as Mayor Livingstone's Commissioner for Transport was aimed at currying favour with big business. After initially describing Kiley as a “union buster”, the RMT backtracked and later welcomed his appointment as a tactical coup—because it had enabled the Mayor to win corporate endorsement and the backing of the financial elite for his proposals.

In the horse-trading that has followed between Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, responsible for the Transport Ministry, and Kiley, the government refused to drop its commitment to introducing separate responsibility for running the trains from the Underground's maintenance and the infrastructure. For his part, Kiley has argued that a unified management structure was the most efficient way of supervising private sector involvement.

With a general election being held on June 7 and Livingstone due to challenge the present PPP structure in the courts in mid-June, Prime Minister Blair moved to iron out the differences. Kiley has been appointed Chair of London Transport, in which capacity, as head of London Underground's parent company, he will be involved in negotiating the terms of the contracts with successful Infraco's.

For Tube workers, the fight to defend their jobs and working conditions can only proceed in a direct struggle against the unions. The fight against PPP requires a political perspective that is not based upon different varieties of privatisation, but genuinely places workers' rights and public safety above the profit motive.



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