

Britain: Union lefts neuter opposition to privatisation of London Underground

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The two trade unions claiming to be leading the fight against privatisation of the London Underground rail network are attempting to wind up opposition, at the very point when the Labour government is handing over control of the infrastructure to private companies.

After a one-day stoppage in February, the leadership of the train drivers' union ASLEF called off all further scheduled action against Labour's proposed Public-Private Partnership (PPP). The executive of the RMT, the main rail union, called off the last 24-hour strike just before it was due to start on May 2, recommending its members accept a similar offer to that agreed by ASLEF, which the unions claim amounts to a guarantee of job security.

Both unions are attempting to portray management's proposal as a major climb-down, because it promises that any employee faced with redundancy would receive an alternative job offer. But such a placement could be at any location on the network and at any grade. The union-management agreement describes this "as a mechanism to deal with surplus staff if voluntary processes do not work."

No undertaking is given to maintain existing staffing levels, while the proposed agreement commits the unions to collaborate with new working arrangements in return for "avoiding compulsory redundancies." What this would entail can be seen in the latest pay negotiations. In return for a pay increase set at the rate of inflation, management is demanding a reduction in paid overtime, an increase in part-time workers and total labour flexibility.

While station staff and drivers would remain within the public sector, they would not be insulated from the greater levels of exploitation facing the 6,000 workers being transferred to the private corporations that will take over the infrastructure of the Tube under the Labour government's plans. It exposes the unions' claim that the detrimental effects of PPP can be prevented without opposing its implementation.

In the course of the last decade, the RMT and ASLEF have presided over a reduction of staffing levels on London Underground from 21,630 to 15,560, while passenger journeys have increased from 751 million to 927 million. The union bureaucracy has reconciled itself to the implementation of PPP. Its sole aim is to ensure the preservation of its own interests within the new privatised network, hence the recommendation to accept the management offer. While the proposed agreement does not

satisfy any of the major demands of Tube workers, it does enshrine the position of the unions in the negotiating procedures with management, and promises that any reduction in staffing levels and other changes would be implemented through collaboration. With their own privileged position secured, further strike action would be embarrassing for the bureaucracy of the rail unions and also threatens to disrupt their relations with management.

Recommendation of the current offer by the rail unions came after sustained pressure exerted by the TUC General Secretary John Monks during the talks at ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service). The Labour government no doubt urged Monks to see the strikes were aborted in the run-up to the general election on June 7 and ensure the smooth implementation of PPP. But Monks has relied on the so-called left within the RMT leadership, and at regional and local union level, to push this policy through. RMT Assistant General Secretary Bob Crow called for the suspension of the strike and acceptance of management's offer. Crow is a leading member of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), founded in 1996 by the National Union of Mineworkers' President Arthur Scargill.

After stating on May 1 that the strike would proceed, the next afternoon, Crow announced it was being "suspended". He argued for acceptance of the management proposals at a meeting of RMT officials and local representatives on May 8, but this was rejected overwhelmingly. Crow had promised that the so-called offer of job security would be put in place "the day before the privatisation deal would come into effect" and concluded, "I can put my hand on my heart and say this is the best we could have offered the membership." Crow claimed he would abide by the decision of the majority, and the RMT then announced two further 24-hour stoppages, with one on June 6, the eve of polling day. But the union immediately sought discussions with management, in an effort to get the planned strikes called off.

The various radical groups organised within the electoral umbrella of the Socialist Alliance, which advances itself as an alternative to the Labour Party, have worked to keep opposition to the RMT leadership at the level of ineffective protest. The Socialist Workers Party's newspaper left it to an unnamed union member to make some mild criticisms of Crow, saying he should not have "gone along with calling off the strike," but who had "played a good role up to now".

Whatever tactical differences its constituent parts may have, the Socialist Alliance is united by its insistence on preserving the

authority of the trade unions over the working class. Those such as Crow owe their position within the RMT to rank-and-file disaffection with the right wing. But they work at all times to protect the right wing from any effective political challenge. They reject the fight for the political independence of the working class and seek to channel all opposition into a campaign limited to putting pressure on the trade union leaders and the Labour government.

They are desperately attempting to maintain the fiction that the RMT is still committed to a fight against privatisation. The union had called today's demonstration over rail safety and opposition to privatisation. However, RMT head office sent out very little publicity for a protest it views as a political liability in the midst of a general election campaign in which the union is fully backing Labour.

It has fallen to the SLP and the radical groups in the Socialist Alliance to do the legwork for the protest, but they make no call for a struggle against the RMT leadership. Instead, RMT rep and Socialist Alliance member Janine Booth urges Tube workers, "don't hold your breath waiting for RMT head office to produce publicity—do your own! Stick some posters up, put it on the agenda of your next union branch, put it in your next mailing, go and leaflet your local station, consider organising transport to get people there, bring yourself and your banners and placards."

The relationship between the SA and the labour bureaucracy is exemplified by their role in the pressure group Campaign Against Tube Privatisation (CATP). This was founded by the RMT's London Transport Regional Council (LTRC), an intermediary body between the local union branches and the national leadership, which is dominated by individuals aligned to the SLP and the Socialist Alliance. Earlier, it took the decision to stand its own slate in by-elections against the official Labour candidates. But these efforts were swiftly abandoned, once the then Labour National Executive Committee member and MP Ken Livingstone declared he would stand as an independent candidate for London Mayor on a programme that included opposition to PPP, earning him expulsion from the Labour Party.

The CATP stood eleven candidates for the newly created London Assembly. However, its main platform in the mayoral elections held in May 2000 became support for Livingstone. Pat Sikorski, Secretary of the LTRC, drafted the call for a CATP vote. Sikorski came to prominence in the early 1990s as a leading light of a rank-and-file union protest movement, and used this to win a position within the middle ranks of the bureaucracy. He was a leading light in Scargill's SLP until 1998.

The CATP insisted that a successful struggle against privatisation was dependent on Livingstone's leadership, rather than independent action by the working class. The election statement read, "When the CATP Tube workers began their efforts they fought alone. Now Ken Livingstone has burst onto the scene and there is hope on the horizon. He has transformed the prospects for saving the Tube, and London Transport, from disaster."

The CATP statement called for support for the bond scheme championed by Livingstone as the alternative to PPP, however, this is merely a variant of privatisation. The programme Livingstone and his Transport Commissioner Robert Kiley have

proposed for funding London Underground is based upon a system known as "securitisation," which consists of selling bonds on the stock market secured against the future revenues of the Tube. Without granting ownership of London Underground's assets, it guarantees financiers purchasing the bonds first claim on its future income. In addition, Kiley has made it clear that his proposals would allow for a large part of the infrastructure maintenance on the network to be outsourced to the private sector.

Leading figures within the CATP had attempted to silence any criticisms by claiming that the bond scheme was the only realistic alternative to the government's plans. Kiley's record as the former head of the New York Subway in attacking pay and conditions is passed over in silence and his appointment defended, on the grounds that he has helped win big business support for Livingstone's option.

Kiley rejects separating the operation of Underground trains from the maintenance of the track and infrastructure (the system introduced throughout the national rail network with disastrous consequences). He wants London Underground management to supervise the day-to-day work of private contractors. The Blair government has recognised that Kiley shares its central aim of opening up the Tube to the private sector, and recently appointed him as Chair of London Transport, responsible for negotiating the contracts with successful bidders.

For his part, Livingstone's days opposing the Labour government are already coming to an end. When he became Mayor, he promised that he would hold every Labour MP to account over PPP during the general election. Instead, after first seeking approval from Labour central office, he has been out campaigning for a Labour vote. His threatened legal challenge to PPP, which was to go to the High Court on June 12, has been "postponed". A spokeswoman for the Mayor explained, "This is in order to ease the path of the negotiations taking place between Mr Kiley and the private sectors bidders." It could also possibly ease Mr Livingstone's path back into the Labour Party.

As the experience of the London Underground workers shows, the role of the SLP and the radical groups making up the Socialist Alliance is to subordinate the working class to one or other section of the trade union and Labour bureaucracy. No successful struggle is possible on this basis.



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