

Rail union winds down opposition to London Underground privatisation

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After reaching an agreement with London Underground the RMT trade union has called an end to its one-day strikes against the privatisation of the network. In attempting to deflect criticism that this constitutes an acceptance of the Labour government's Public Private Partnership (PPP), the union claims that the deal secures the jobs and conditions of Tube workers whilst meeting safety concerns over the impact of privatisation.

The issue of job losses is a major concern. Over the last decade, London Underground has reduced the workforce by a quarter. With the introduction of PPP, 6,000 staff face transfer to the private sector. The agreement does not ensure that job losses will not occur. What it states is, "It is the policy of LUL [London Underground Limited], the Infracos [private infrastructure companies] and their subsidiaries to work with the union to *avoid compulsory redundancies* and provide job security (*including one job offer* to any member of staff who becomes surplus and is displaced)." (Emphasis added)

Faced with the prospect of redundancy, a Tube worker, whether remaining within the public sector or transferred to one of the Infracos will be offered redeployment. This can be on any part of the network and there are no limits to how many times this can be applied. The wording of the agreement implies that it covers the displacement of individual members of staff, but groups of workers could face redundancy. In terms of the suitability of the alternative job offer for Infraco staff, the agreement merely states that the employee's views about the redeployment to another company "will be taken into account."

In return for this, the agreement commits the RMT to "cooperate with the introduction of organisational change and new working arrangements." In the circulars sent around by the union promoting the deal, no comment is made on this. While the agreement does not specify what these new working arrangements are, management's

intentions have been spelt out in the stalled negotiations over the shorter working week and the current pay talks. Productivity strings and job flexibility are the order of the day in both instances. This includes the removal of job demarcations, an increase in part-time working, a reduction in overtime pay and complete flexibility of staff.

Until now, the RMT has refused to accept these terms, but the agreement will oblige them to collaborate with this overhaul.

The agreement does not meet the concerns that any future reduction in staffing levels will adversely affect safety. No confidence can be placed in the undertaking to exhaust the negotiation process in such cases. Despite the clear safety case for employing train guards, London Underground managed to eliminate the job—something that even the private train operating companies on the national network have not succeeded in doing.

The other major issue is the right of staff to remain on their existing terms and conditions of employment. The union has extolled the fact that employees transferred from one employer to another will have their present terms and conditions legally protected. However, the protection of such entitlements such as contractual salary, hours, annual leave and sick pay will not be extended to new employees. The RMT's initial demand only allowed for staff already employed on December 22, 2000 to be protected. This will open up the possibility for workers doing the same job to be paid less money with inferior entitlements and conditions. In other cases where work formerly carried out by London Underground has been contracted out to the private sector, inferior contracts have been imposed on new recruits. Engineers working for Cubic are paid £3,000 less and work longer hours than those staff transferred from London Underground. This would be extended under PPP, as it was in other privatisations such as London Buses and on the national

railways.

Another sign of the accommodation made by the RMT to privatisation of the Tube is the marked change in rhetoric. A circular sent out by the RMT London Transport Regional Council (LRTC) only days before the dispute was called off carried the banner headline, “Keep Focused on the BIG Issue—P.P.P. = R.I.P”.

“The privatisation of BR [British Rail] has meant dead staff and dead passengers. PPP will mean the same on LUL. That’s why we must stick together and strike on 4th and 6th June. No Hatfields here.”

Yet the union has called off the dispute right at the point when the contracts to run two of the three sections of the Underground infrastructure are being finalised. London’s Transport Commissioner Bob Kiley is negotiating with the two consortia, which include companies like Balfour Beatty, implicated in the Hatfield derailment last October, which claimed the lives of six people. Now the union talks complacently about winning the “first stage” of the struggle against PPP and preparing for the next, as if it were somewhere in the distant future.

The central theme of the agreement is the incorporation of the unions into the process of PPP, with the changes required by privatisation being carried out with their collaboration. The Labour government and LU management recognise that they cannot hope to implement PPP without the unions’ collaboration.

It was the RMT that overruled the last two strikes, called with an 11-to-one majority, the largest ever recorded in the history of London Underground. The deal accepted does not differ substantially from the one that was proposed by the RMT and management earlier in May, but rejected by local union reps. This time round, the local reps were brought directly into the negotiations and only 30 percent voted to continue opposition. The RMT Executive then announced the cancellation of the two one-day stoppages during general election week.

From the start, the union refused to make the strike into a political struggle against the government’s privatisation programme, saying instead it was fighting against the “effects” of privatisation. This terminology was presented as a ploy to circumvent the anti-strike laws that forbid industrial action of a “political” nature. For their part, the lefts within the union sought to channel opposition into pressure groups such as the Campaign against Tube Privatisation (CATP). The main activity of this group was to support the election of former Labour MP Ken Livingstone as London Mayor on a platform of opposing PPP, who ran against the official Labour Party candidate

Frank Dobson.

Since Livingstone’s victory, his appointee as Transport Commissioner, Bob Kiley, has been co-opted by the government onto the parent body of London Underground, Transport for London, to oversee the final terms of the contracts with the private companies maintaining the rail infrastructure. Though still expelled from the party, Livingstone received permission to campaign for a Labour vote in this month’s general election. He also agreed to postpone his High Court action against PPP, in order to facilitate the negotiations between Kiley and the private sector bidders.

Leading figures within the CATP, such as Oliver New of the RMT Regional Council, attempts to justify the settlement even though it leaves PPP intact. After giving a number of reasons why future strike action would be futile, he claims that the deal reached “won the demands on which we had taken action! This is bearing in mind that the anti-union laws restricted our room for manoeuvre in drawing up strike demands.”

Platt attempts to brush aside CATP’s support for Livingstone by declaring, we “now have to discuss what we can do next to beat the PPP, because nobody will do this for us. I don’t dismiss the Kiley/Livingstone court case as irrelevant, but if that happens it happens, we have to win our own battles.” On the issue of new employees not being given the same protection as existing staff, New writes dismissively that this “raises the risk of a two-tier position, although it has to be said that staff turnover is very low—LUL workers usually seem to stay for 20 years or so.”



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