London Underground workers strike over new working patterns

Daniel O'Rourke
4 January 2006

London Underground (LU) gate line, platform and ticket office workers struck for 24 hours on New Year's Eve against the imposition of new working patterns and the issuing of "at risk of displacement" letters.

As a result of the strike about 40 out of London's 275 stations were closed, including Covent Garden in the heart of London's West End and King's Cross, one of the capital's busiest stations.

LU says the new patterns are part of the Shorter Working Week (SWW) pay deal it agreed with the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) last November. The union described the two-year deal as "groundbreaking" and sold it as a two-and-a-half hour reduction in the working week to 35 hours, albeit "self financing", i.e., to be paid for by the workers themselves.

At the time the RMT said there would be no job cuts. The union says, however, that it was not shown the new work patterns during last year's negotiations and that the number of workers being displaced is many times the 200 it was told would be the case during the talks. RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said, "The rosters that LU intend to impose would reduce the number of station staff on duty at any one time, in many cases by more than half. We believe that that would leave stations with insufficient cover, especially in emergencies."

The RMT said 4,000 workers had taken strike action and called on LU to accept a compromise offer it was proposing to prevent a second stoppage scheduled to begin on January 8. The union also warned that Tube drivers and signal workers could be balloted for action short of striking because LU had breached safety standards during the New Year's Eve strike by using untrained management and office staff.

Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, declared the strike a "non-event" and claimed, "The majority of London Underground staff did not agree that it made sense to punish ordinary Londoners on New Year's Eve."

The New Year's Eve strike had all the hallmarks of a token opposition action by the RMT bureaucracy to the conditions now being imposed on Tube workers as a result of the SWW pay deal. For their part, unions representing other Tube workers have left the station staff isolated, even though their members are facing the same situation. The white collar Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) reminded its members that it was "not in dispute with LU at this time" and to work normally, although it complained "staff were being subjected to an unagreed process ... and many more staff than we expected have received 'at risk of displacement' letters."

Train drivers in the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) union continued to work.

The strike call is an about-turn by the RMT and is due to the growing opposition by Tube workers as the implications of last year's wage deal become apparent. Letters sent by local managers, headed "Shorter Working Week—Formal Notification: At Risk of Displacement," said, "As you are aware, following extensive negotiations, the shorter working week for station employees is being introduced on Sunday February 5, 2006. As a direct result of this, I regret to inform you that you are at risk of being displaced from your current position."

The threat of transferring staff from one end of the Underground system to the other, as has now happened, was played down by the unions, as well as the fact that for the first time the deal was negotiated on a group by group basis. Future negotiations based on a group of several stations will lead to competition between them, pitting workers against each other, and will lead the way for different wage levels within the network. This is the tried and tested method of divide and rule, which was so successful in facilitating the privatisation of the bus network in Britain and particularly in London—a move that was only possible thanks to the full participation of the unions.

The latest strike is the product of the Labour government's programme to privatise the Underground system through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) scheme in 2000. In order to deflect public criticism over the disastrous national rail privatisation by the previous Conservative government, Labour said that the running of LU trains would remain within the public sector while the maintenance of the track and stations would be placed under the control of the private sector. The placing of profit before safety by the private companies in charge of the national railway's infrastructure was the main factor in the subsequent rise in rail accidents.

The LU unions promised a joint campaign against the threat PPP posed to safety and jobs. A ballot of RMT members in 2001 resulted in the largest majority for strike action ever recorded in the history of LU—by 11 to 1. That so few trains ran was also a measure of the degree to which the picket lines were respected by ASLEF members. On the Circle Line and Hammersmith and City—where ASLEF members constitute the majority of train operators—there was no service.

For Tube workers the strikes were seen primarily as a means to stop PPP, but the RMT has always refused to make this its explicit aim, saying instead it was fighting against the "effects" of privatisation. The unions claimed that to say explicitly they were opposing privatisation would mean that a strike would be deemed "political" and therefore illegal under Tory antiunion legislation kept on the statute books by New Labour. However, the union's refusal to challenge the undemocratic antiunion laws is bound up with their own desire to avoid any action that could arouse a broader questioning of

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the profit motive and the extension of the market into the public sector.

Once it had reached an agreement with LU safeguarding its own interests, the RMT bureaucracy called an end to one-day strikes against privatisation. The central theme of the agreement was the incorporation of the unions into the process of PPP. The Labour government and LU management recognised that they could not hope to implement PPP without the unions' collaboration.

In attempting to deflect criticism that this constitutes an acceptance of PPP, the union claimed that the deal secured the jobs and conditions of Tube workers whilst meeting safety concerns over the impact of privatisation.

For their part, the lefts within the unions sought to channel opposition into pressure groups such as the Campaign against Tube Privatisation (CATP). The main activity of this group was to support in May the election as London mayor of former Labour MP Ken Livingstone, who ran against the official Labour Party candidate Frank Dobson.

The RMT and ASLEF supported Livingstone's election, claiming LU would be safe in his hands. Livingstone had made opposition to the government's PPP plans for the Underground central to his campaign, 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 against Dobson.

Livingstone also threatened to make privatisation a "live issue" during the general elections. He appeared on rally platforms organised by the rail unions and pledged to join drivers on the picket lines during their strike. But Livingstone used the unpopularity of PPP to increase his political influence with government and big business, while promoting a "bond scheme"—an alternative means of raising private capital for the Underground.

In the same week the High Court ruled against the RMT's industrial action, Labour announced that Bob Kiley—Livingstone's Transport Commissioner—had been placed in charge of redrafting government proposals for PPP. Kiley's only difference with the government's original plans appeared to be on dividing the Underground's infrastructure into three segments. In return for this cooperation, Kiley said the bond scheme had been dropped.

Kiley leaves his job as transport commissioner at the end of January, but has been re-employed as Livingstone's "principal transport adviser," according to the mayor. After collecting his final salary of £700,000, he will be paid £280,000 for 90 days' work in 2008—£3,000 a day. He will be allowed to continue living rent-free in the £2.1 million house provided for him in Belgravia. His work will concentrate on the Tube PPP contract negotiations that Livingstone once professed to oppose.

In 2001, the government announced the names of the consortia it had selected to run the LU infrastructure for the next 30 years. They included companies that have been implicated in the worst disasters to occur on the national railways since it was privatised in the early 1990s. Three of the twelve tube lines—Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly—are being upgraded, replaced and maintained by the infrastructure company (infraco) Tubelines, which includes Amey—the firm responsible for the signalling around London's Paddington station. In 1999, a poorly sighted signal SN109 was responsible for the collision of two trains that claimed the lives of 31 passengers.

The remaining nine lines are controlled by the infraco 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 two infracos won multimillion-pound bonuses for "doing a good job" in July 2005 after LU issued a progress report. Even ASLEF General Secretary Keith Norman was moved to say, "Any schoolboy would be frightened stiff to take home an end-of-term report like this.... It would lead to all kinds of enquiries, condemnations and recriminations."

Norman added, "It is a chronicle of failures and empty promises of progress. It proves the nonsense of the philosophy that private enterprise is inherently efficient. I hope it will prove a useful lesson to government economists as well as London Underground planners."

Such polite complaints aside, the only lesson the trade union bureaucracy has taught the government has been to count on its willingness to collaborate with whatever attacks on tube workers it intends to make. The union leaders have already agreed with Metronet to set up a commission to look at the wages and conditions of new employees and the company's final salary pension scheme.

Nevertheless, Norman's point holds true. Signal failures, for example, increased by 43 percent in the first four months of 2005 and the overrun on engineering projects have increased by 35 percent year on year.

The recent moves to "displace" workers are also linked to the introduction of the Oyster card electronic ticketing system that can be recharged via the Internet or passenger-operated ticket machines situated in every station. LU are forcing passengers to use the Oyster system by almost doubling the price of paper tickets whilst reducing some Oyster card fares. From January 1, 2006 in Zone 1 covering central London the "travel card" paper ticket will be scrapped and the single fare increased from £2 to £3. The minimum paper ticket price on the whole network will be £3.

Not only does the new pricing system overwhelmingly favour the Oyster card, but some stations are forced to close ticket offices and redeploy staff during peak periods and weekends—again forcing passengers to use the new system.

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