

RMT union suspends strike by London Underground maintenance workers

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As we go to press it is reported that the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has suspended the strike action taken by some 2,300 London Underground maintenance workers. The planned 72-hour strike began at 1800 hours on Monday in a dispute over jobs and pension rights following the collapse of rail maintenance company Metronet.

There are no details of the basis on which the strike was suspended just before midnight Tuesday evening. But there is no doubt that the RMT's action will have sacrificed its members' interests in a rotten compromise from which the union bureaucracy alone will benefit. Above all, it will have been anxious to preserve the political stability of the Labour government under conditions where millions of other workers are seeking to oppose effective wage cuts and privatisation.

The capital had been thrown into chaos for more than 24 hours after the strike closed nine Tube lines completely and two more were left with a much reduced service. The capital's 3 million commuters tried to get to work on the three remaining lines—the Northern, Jubilee and Docklands Light Railway—or in buses and taxis.

The railworkers' action follows recent unofficial disputes involving prison officers and postal workers, both of which remain unresolved and which indicate growing opposition to the government's attempts to impose a 2 percent wage limit on public sector workers.

Government appointed administrators Ernst & Young had been called in after Metronet announced debts of £2 billion and the industry regulator rejected its plea for an extra £551 million of funding. In 1998, the company had won two of the three 30-year, £17 billion contracts under the Labour government's hugely unpopular Public Private Partnership (PPP) programme to maintain and renew track, tunnels and signalling. Metronet's owners, five international corporations, refused to put in another penny beyond their original £350 million commitment under the terms of the contract.

The maintenance workers had taken action in a bid to guarantee the security of their jobs, pensions and conditions. But their strike was bitterly denounced by the Labour-run administration in London and the government. Prime Minister Gordon Brown called the dispute “wholly unjustified” and told strikers to return to work, saying, “It is causing an enormous

amount of trouble to the people of London and disruption to the business of the city.”

London Mayor Ken Livingstone described the strike as “bizarre” and “inexplicable.” Claiming that the workers' jobs and conditions were safe, he continued, “This must be the first time in history of a union going on strike when everyone has acceded to their demands.... I cannot explain the mindset that has led them to their action today.”

A spokesman for Transport for London (TfL) said of the strike, “We would like to offer some hope to our customers of an early end to this dispute but it is difficult to be optimistic given the RMT's continuing failure to respond to a categorical guarantee on jobs and pensions provided by the Mayor, Transport for London, the administrator and Metronet.”

Livingstone's pledge had been enough for two of the three unions involved to call off their strike three hours before it was due to take place—Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) and UNITY. TSSA General Secretary Gerry Doherty said, “We are satisfied on jobs and transfers and hopefully we can resolve outstanding pension issues.... We are particularly anxious that the administrators and Metronet assure our members that they will keep all their entitlements when the PPP contract is transferred.

“We are pleased that the Mayor has confirmed that he wants to take the contract in-house and we recognise that his intervention has been helpful in proving the basis for an eventual solution to this dispute.”

In reality, Ernst and Young had earlier refused to give any such assurances. The *Times* of August 1 reported, “Ernst and Young have told unions that all previous agreements reached with Metronet are now no longer valid now the company is in administration.”

The administrator claimed on September 3 that it had persuaded the two unions to abandon their strike by giving assurances that “meet all of their concerns.” But Livingstone's “guarantees” and those of Ernst and Young are worthless because they only cover the period during which Metronet is under administration, not after it is sold on.

A press release from the Greater London Authority (GLA), framed as a “Dear Bob” letter to RMT leader Bob Crow from Alan Bloom, the joint PPP administrator, and Metronet CEO

Andrew Lezala, stated clearly:

“Further to discussions with the Mayor of London, we can confirm that we both agree that *during the period of administration* there will be no streamlining or transfer of employees from Metronet. We believe that you have been given an assurance by the Mayor that TFL will be *urging* the Pensions Board of Trustees to *ensure* that no staff will lose a penny of their Pension entitlement whilst Metronet remains in administration. A recommendation from a working party of the board of Trustees of the Pension Fund, upon which the unions are represented, will be *considered* by the full board of Trustees on Wednesday 5th September” (emphasis added).

No doubt the strike’s suspension will see all these fine phrases vanish into the ether.

During the strike, a statement posted on the RMT’s web site had complained that it was “astonishing that the administrators can decide all sorts of things, including who will take over the PPP contracts, but is unable to give an unequivocal guarantee that the jobs of the people who will actually deliver the Tube upgrades will be safe.

“We have been told that the pension funds trustees will be ‘urged’ to ensure that employees lose no pension during the period of administration, but no amount of ‘urging’ amounts to a guarantee, and this is not a matter for the trustees in any case.”

The statement called for pension provisions to remain the same “past, present and future” and claimed the transfer of workers to a “public-sector organisation” was “the only way that jobs and pensions can be protected.” However, the experience of workers in the remaining “public-sector” part of the London Underground and elsewhere show that this is not the case at all.

PPP was the method by which the Blair government, with Gordon Brown as chancellor of the exchequer, championed the privatisation of the London Underground. Claiming the market and corporate efficiency was the optimum way of financing years of under-funding, the track, tunnels and signalling were farmed out to the private sector via the PPP. But the station staff who are all still employed by the “public-sector” are now going through a vast restructuring, with as many as 40 ticketing offices due to close by April 2008 and increased use of part-time workers.

The unions are dividing the huge opposition to these attacks by carrying out local agreements between small groups of stations, so as to prevent any companywide momentum developing. At the same time they had sought to prevent any link-up with the workers at Metronet, while sowing illusions that pressurising the Labour government and the Greater London assembly to return to some form of state-run system will protect jobs and pension rights.

On Tuesday afternoon, the RMT had organised a lobby of the Department of Transport—the very government department that has overseen the Metronet debacle—to appeal for the

underground maintenance to be brought back “in-house,” equating this with public ownership of the transport network.

Brown had made clear that no such move will be contemplated, stating, “If Metronet pull out, then another private company will be found to take its place.”

For its part TfL, under the leadership of Livingstone, has proposed to bid for the PPP contract. This would be one way in which the RMT would be able to claim that it had secured concessions, on the basis that maintenance was once again “in-house.” It is a demand also endorsed by radical groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, which on August 28 published a letter from Paul O’Brien, the RMT’s senior rep on Tube Lines, and Unjum Mirza, the RMT’s political officer for the London Transport region, claiming, “The campaign that the unions have launched to bring Metronet back in-house is having a huge impact. Mayor Ken Livingstone’s Transport for London (TfL) has said that it wants to take over the running of Metronet ‘on a temporary basis’.”

O’Brien and Mirza wrote that the RMT “don’t want public control on a ‘temporary basis’—we want it permanently. All contracts, not just Metronet, should be brought back in-house.”

Even if maintenance and other services were run directly by the GLA, the fate of Tube workers would still be dictated by what best serves the interests of big business. Contracts would only be secured by offering to do what the banks and other investors demand. Public transport requires vast amounts of funding, but global capital will invest only if it can guarantee profits. It is this which necessitates the elimination of working conditions won over decades of struggle.

The RMT’s rush to suspend the strike makes clear that the union bureaucracy are implacably hostile to the one thing that is above all necessary if jobs, pensions and services are to be defended—a political struggle against the government and the GLA.

Maintenance workers must turn out to other sections of workers in the capital and throughout the country, urging united action against the efforts of the Brown government to slash wages and privatise essential services. This must begin with a united offensive by London Transport workers, including bus drivers, in open defiance of the sabotaging of such action by the union tops. Such a struggle can only be organised independently of the entire Labour and trade union bureaucracy through rank-and-file organisations of the working class.



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