

Britain: Union leaders stifle growing militancy of London Underground workers

Daniel O'Flynn, Paul Mitchell
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Leaders of the Rail, Maritime and Transport trade union (RMT) are seeking to stifle the growing militancy on the London Underground rail system and prevent the development of a political opposition to the Labour government.

On August 19, the RMT Executive suspended a 72-hour strike by 1,000 engineers and maintenance workers at private infrastructure company Tube Lines after accepting a wage deal of 4.99 percent backdated to April this year and the promise of a rise next year equal to inflation.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said, "RMT members at Tube Lines are to be congratulated for the unity and commitment they have displayed during this dispute, not least in the face of hostile media coverage." He admitted the union had had difficulty selling the deal.

The following day, on August 20, the executive called off a threatened 48-hour strike by 700 cleaners working for subcontractors ISS, ICS, Initial and GBM.

The cleaners had voted by 99.2 percent for industrial action and already held several strikes in an effort to force new Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson to honour the pledge made by former Labour Mayor Ken Livingstone to pay them the "London living wage" of £7.45 an hour. Livingstone had used this promise to defuse anger after the collapse last year of the Metronet public private partnership (PPP) with debts of £2 billion. In return, the RMT suspended strike action and campaigned for Metronet to be taken over by state-run Transport for London (TfL) permanently rather than sold off—the Labour government's favoured option.

In the event, Johnson backed down, claiming it was a "trivial dispute," but made it clear his aim is to get a no-strike regime imposed on London's transport system as a prelude to further attacks on wages and conditions. The agreement meant cleaners working on Metronet lines received a rise from £5.50 to £7.45 an hour from September 1, 2008. Workers on Tube Lines will have to wait until April 1, 2009, to receive the full amount.

Crow declared, "This is a massive breakthrough which will see all Tube cleaners paid the London living wage by

next April at the latest."

The Tube workers withstood massive intimidation from management, the government and the media to break through the government's 2 percent wage limit for the public sector. However, to claim that these pay awards represent a "massive breakthrough" is a distortion.

The cleaners' new wage rates are no more now than cleaners on the Underground earned before privatisation. Their demands for 28 days' holiday, sick pay, pension rights, travel concessions and the end of what is called "third party sackings" in which they can be sacked without redress to disciplinary hearings or independent appeals remain unresolved.

Since the agreement was made, the cleaning companies, which previously turned a blind eye to the employment of undocumented workers, have suddenly introduced national insurance checks. At least three workers have been detained and two deported.

In addition, the industrial action was called off just as rail workers at the Charing Cross group of stations, East Ham group and Rickmansworth group were taking action. Bill posters working at CBS Outdoor and Eurostar cleaners had voted unanimously to strike. Other public sector workers are also threatening industrial action.

For all the RMT's denunciations of conditions on the London Underground and criticisms of privatisation, they never address the fact that the trade unions were directly responsible for allowing privatisation to happen in the first place.

Since Labour's election, it has faithfully served its capitalist masters, tearing up welfare entitlement, privatising key sectors of public services, and overturning democratic rights. No demand has been too great.

The PPP programme was the method by which they championed the privatisation of the London Underground. Claiming the market and corporate efficiency was the optimum way of financing after years of underfunding, proposals for farming out the track, tunnels and signalling to the private sector via the PPP were announced in 2001.

Crow's election as general secretary of the RMT that year was an expression of how New Labour had alienated large sections of workers. Crow, a former member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, was one of a new layer of officials dubbed the "awkward squad" by the media. Such victories were hailed by left groups such as the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party as the start of a revival of militant trade unionism that would challenge the government.

Rail workers voted three times for strike action against the PPP proposals, but the RMT repeatedly called-off strikes at the last minute and overturned ballots for action. While workers saw strike action as a means of opposing privatisation, the unions refused to make this their explicit aim. Where one-day strikes did happen, they were the result of unofficial action.

As a result, two new companies, Metronet and Tube Lines, were set up in 2003 to run the maintenance and cleaning operations, many of which were further outsourced.

Crow and the other union bureaucrats hoped to convince the government that it had to make some concessions if it was to avoid class confrontation and retain political credibility. At first, the RMT sought to put pressure on the Labour leaders by withholding union funds. Crow was adamant that "for the trade union movement to abandon the Labour Party would be a serious mistake." But within the RMT, only a few hundred of its 70,000 members remained members of the party.

At the RMT's Annual General Meeting in 2003, a vote was passed allowing branches to affiliate to and provide finance for other political organisations of their choosing. Soon after, the Scottish Regional Council applied to the RMT executive for affiliation to the Scottish Socialist Party.

The SSP was the result of the regroupment strategy pursued by the Socialist Party and its predecessor, the Militant Tendency, which claimed that the formation of a new socialist party would arise through a realignment of left elements within the Labour Party, the various fragments of the old Stalinist Communist Party and the smaller left groups. Such parties would be based on a reformist programme, with Marxists operating as a tendency within them much as Militant had operated within the old Labour Party. At first orienting to the defunct Socialist Labour Party set up by British miners' union leader Arthur Scargill and Rifundazione Comunista in Italy, which emerged out of a split in the Italian Communist Party, the SP then set up the Socialist Alliance, which Crow joined.

The project failed and was subsequently abandoned in England. In Scotland, it enjoyed a longer duration thanks to its explicit embrace of Scottish nationalism and support for the newly devolved capitalist parliament. Later, it too fell

apart amidst a bitter split.

In the meantime, the RMT's flirtation with the SSP led Labour's national executive to expel the union, claiming it had broken the party's constitution.

Crow continues to campaign to a more viable political vehicle to help bolster the dwindling political authority of the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour "left," such as it is. At the second conference of the SP-led Campaign for a New Workers Party, on June 29, he declared, "What our members don't want to see is another Respect or Socialist Labour Party. They want to see a political party—and we've got to move towards it."

Crow's proposed alternative for his union has proven to offer no progressive way forward for working people. The era of global production, facilitated by developments in computerisation and telecommunications, has destroyed the basis for such national reformist strategies. No longer able to reconcile its policy of social reforms with its defence of capitalism, Labour has transformed itself into the direct political instrument for imposing the dictates of global capital. The same process has taken place within the trade unions, which have overseen greater exploitation, longer working hours and lower wages.

What is required is the establishment of rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the RMT, coordinate joint action across the London Underground and appeal for support from the millions of workers and commuters whose safety is compromised on a daily basis by the drive to ratchet up exploitation and cut costs. Such an industrial offensive can only succeed if it is linked to a new political strategy, which rejects the capitalist market as the basis for the organisation of economic and social life and places social need over corporate profit.



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