

Britain: RMT Tube workers face union busting and organised scabbing by drivers' union ASLEF

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Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union workers yesterday ended a two-day strike on the London Underground (LU) against plans by the company and its parent body Transport for London (TfL) to cut over 1,000 jobs. Other estimates suggest the figure could reach 4,000 as TfL carries out £2.4 billion worth of spending cuts.

RMT members continue to face a united front of employers, government and the media, which launched a vitriolic campaign denouncing strikers as selfish, greedy and overpaid. Nothing less is being contemplated than the union busting of the RMT in order to freely impose any and all management dictates.

The *Times* denounced tube workers for “industrial sabotage” and waging a politically motivated strike. RMT leader Bob Crow was “bitterly hostile to the proposal by Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, for a long-term no-strike deal”, the *Times* complained. “It is high time that Mr. Crow was emasculated,” it continued. “Unfortunately, the mayor does not have the immediate option of dismissing all the striking workers, a tactic used to devastating effect by President Reagan in his clash with striking air traffic control workers.”

Justin Williams in the *Telegraph* also referred to Reagan’s union busting operation against the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization in 1981 as a “breathtakingly bold move that inspired Margaret Thatcher to break the National Union of Mineworkers three years later”, by sacking “the entire unionised workforce responsible for guiding all airliners to take off and landing in the United States.”

“The breaking of the NUM by Mrs. Thatcher, PATCO by Reagan and the print unions by Rupert Murdoch were not easy options,” Williams continued. “But they were industrial moments which were crucial to the future growth and prosperity of Britain and America. So today—almost 28 years after Reagan sacked the entire air traffic control workforce—isn’t it about time that Bob Crow faced his own

industrial moment?”

Crow and the RMT leadership are far from being the intransigent class warriors they are being portrayed by the press. The union made repeated efforts to secure a compromise agreement, but was met with abject refusal by management. The RMT had agreed to put a two-year pay deal to a vote of its 9,000 members and to consider the dispute over the dismissal of two of its members separately. There was also a virtual deal on the outstanding issue of compulsory redundancies.

According to the RMT, an agreement with LU had been reached at the arbitration service ACAS and a deal was being typed up when it was “scuppered” at the last minute. According to Crow, “The whole thing stinks of last minute sabotage and the RMT believes that must have come from the very top, and the finger is pointing at [London Mayor] Boris Johnson and Transport Commissioner Peter Hendy.”

The finger points not only to the Conservative city administration headed by Johnson and LU management, but the Labour government and the entire ruling elite. It is considered imperative to crush the first major example of resistance to the billions in cuts planned throughout the public and private sector in response to the raging crisis of British and world capitalism. This will have a devastating impact on working people. Over two million workers are unemployed in the UK and this is predicted to rise to three million by the end of the year. Those who dare to resist, such as the tube workers, are to be isolated, intimidated and forced to acquiesce.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with the employers in this offensive against tube workers is the train drivers union, ASLEF.

ASLEF has not merely ignored repeated calls by the RMT to join the industrial action. It is openly urging its members to cross picket lines. The union’s general secretary, Keith Norman, told the media, “Our members are not involved in this dispute. We believe this dispute can be solved through

negotiation. The fact that so many ASLEF drivers have turned up for work today is highly significant.

“In the past ASLEF drivers would have refused to cross picket lines in support of a rival union. This is evidently not the case today.”

ASLEF’s strike breaking is a betrayal on a par with that carried out by the electricians’ union, the EETPU. In 1986, it notoriously signed a single-union no-strike agreement after Rupert Murdoch’s News International group sacked the entire production workforce at its Fleet Street plant and moved production to new premises in Wapping—the seminal event praised by Williams in the *Telegraph*.

By breaking RMT picket lines ASLEF enabled LU to run 120 out of 500 trains on Wednesday with intermittent services on the Victoria, Northern and Jubilee lines and on part of the District line. A similar number were run on Thursday.

ASLEF is no stranger to stabbing workers in the back. In 2004, office workers employed at its London headquarters were threatened with the sack if they went on strike, and a scab workforce was hired on at lower pay. Earlier, this year ASLEF agreed a £50 an hour bonus for train drivers on the London Midland rail network who continued working whilst conductors were on strike.

Things are not much better at the UK’s biggest union, Unite. A spokesperson made the usual empty platitudes about solidarity with the RMT and declared that UNITE’s 23,000 bus driver members would not be “performing duties beyond their contractual obligations.” However, TfL was able to lay on an extra 100 buses, making 8,000 extra journeys during the strike. Regional industrial organiser, Peter Kavanagh, meekly declared that UNITE was “seeking details from TfL about its contingency plans” and “closely monitoring the effects of industrial action on the health and safety of our members.”

To describe organisations such as ASLEF as trade unions merely sows confusion as to their true nature. They are organisational appendages of corporate management, staffed by a well-paid bureaucracy that functions as an industrial police force. Its members are trapped in a corporatist body that takes their money, only in order to betray them at every crucial juncture.

The RMT does not offer a vehicle through which such open strike breaking can be opposed. It is led by various “lefts” and ex-Stalinists such as Crow, who combine militant rhetoric with a refusal to mobilise politically against their fellow bureaucrats in ASLEF and the rest of the Trades Union Congress. Its opposition to the government, which led it to be expelled from the Labour Party, is essentially based on calls for class collaboration between British workers and British bosses that still allows for some minimal reforms to

be implemented. The latest reports suggest that the RMT has amended TfL’s draft on redundancies and returned it to ACAS.

The struggle against low wages, worsening working conditions and job cuts requires new organisations and a new perspective capable of unifying broad layers of the working class.

Tube workers must seek the solidarity and support of other railway workers and the working class as a whole and work to counter the black propaganda of the media. They must appeal to members of other rail unions, including ASLEF, urging that an attack on one section of workers is an attack on all, that can and must be repelled through a united struggle.

Above all, the political lessons of the role of ASLEF as a strikebreaking organisation must be learned. The rightward turn of the trade unions is an international phenomenon.

Tube workers can not place any confidence in the union bureaucracy to mobilise against the offensive now underway as a result of the economic breakdown. It is organically hostile to any fight which jeopardises its relations with government and management. Workers need to establish independent committees that will take the leadership of the strike into their own hands.

The defence of jobs, as well as of social and democratic rights, requires a fundamentally new political strategy, one that does not make the profit interests of big business the measure of all things, but places the needs of working people at the centre and so pursues socialist objectives. Production must be taken out of the control of the financial aristocracy and placed in the service of society as whole.



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