Rail union overturns strike ballot on London Underground

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has overturned the results of a strike ballot in order to impose London Underground's meagre pay award on its members.

The pay award is 1.5 percent for 2009, and Retail Price Index plus 0.5 percent, or 0.5 percent (whichever is greater), in the second year from April 1, 2010.When measured against the cost of living, this amounts to a pay cut. "Unacceptable," was how the union described the pay offer before the ballot.

Senior managers at London Underground's parent body, Transport for London (TfL), have seen their bonus payments increase by 50 percent over the past two years from £3.6 million in 2007 to £5.3 million in 2009. The RMT had highlighted the fact that the pay offer would amount to only 22 pence a day for at least one grade of tube worker.

The results of the strike ballot were to have been announced on December 21, but the RMT has failed to make them public or issue a press release explaining its decision. The vote was overwhelmingly (84 percent) in favour of industrial action short of a strike, and a 62 percent majority for strike action. The votes were 3,109 for and 594 against, and 2,318 for and 1,402 against, respectively. The turnout was 60 percent.

When the *World Socialist Web Site* obtained these figures from Industrial Relations at Unity House (RMT headquarters), we were told that the results had not been published because they were so low. There is no reason to give this claim credibility.

The dispute over pay has been dragging on for over nine months. In April last year the membership voted by a 5-1 margin in the first strike ballot over the pay and job losses, which the RMT called off due to a legal injunction obtained by London Underground (LU). In June there was a solid 48-hour strike. Since then the union has stalled any further action. If the last vote for all-out strike action was less than emphatic than before, this is due to the growing loss of confidence among tube workers in the union's ability to conduct any fight. There have also been complaints from RMT members that they did not receive ballot papers.

Regional and local representatives are complicit in the sellout. Websites such as *RMT London Calling* and *RMT Platform* have failed to register even a protest. There is no constituency within any section of the union leadership for a defence of the rights of tube workers.

The RMT has now accepted the same pay deal as the drivers' union ASLEF and management body TSSA, to both of which it claimed to represent a militant alternative. This is in keeping with its retreat before management's offensive against jobs and conditions.

Last June the RMT claimed to have secured undertakings from management to protect jobs and prevent further abuses of the disciplinary procedure, and stated that pay was the only matter outstanding. In reality, LU has reduced staffing levels by refusing to cover vacancies. According to one estimate, a third of all jobs on the network have been left vacant, leading to a corresponding increase in productivity of existing staff by 33 percent. Many outlying stations are left unstaffed, and others have been reduced to the bare minimum, posing a risk to health and safety. Management are using the disciplinary procedure in a punitive fashion to realise job cuts, and there are a number of ongoing disputes over reinstatement—such as station staff at Willesden Green and drivers on the Bakerloo Line.

The RMT leaked a document from London Underground last December, the Operational Services Review, revealing plans to close ticket offices at 144 stations (around half of those on the network total) and axe 1,200 jobs. The RMT has allowed LU to implement measures aimed at facilitating ticket office closures.

Management's plan is centred on making the Oyster card (a form of electronic ticketing) the exclusive means of paying for travel. The Oyster card system is a way of paying for travel by charging up a smartcard with credits. Since its introduction in 2004, it has offered cheaper rates for fares than conventional tickets. Last year trials were introduced at selective stations making the minimum top-up at a ticket office window £5 compared to £1.20 at a ticket machine. The RMT was formally opposed to the scheme, but it is now

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policy across the network.

At the same time as tube workers jobs and conditions are under attack, fares are increasing faster than inflation. Tube fares are to jump 3.9 percent, and bus fares will go up 12.7 percent in January. This will hit the lower-paid hardest, as many workers had been priced off the tube onto buses.

Job losses, fare hikes and cancellation of major upgrades are being imposed by Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson and TfL to close a funding gap in the capital's public transport system estimated to reach £5 billion by 2017. The crisis of funding is an indictment of the free market nostrums that have served as the basis for running the transport system along business lines over the past two decades.

LU has become reliant on fare revenue to finance its day-to-day operations on a user-pay principle. The claim that opening up the network to the private sector would create a competitive environment that would deliver improved performance and value for money in the form of Public Private Partnership (PPP) has been refuted. The government subsidy has been siphoned off to allow the contractors to pay high dividends to their shareholders or settle with creditors after administration.

The overpriced fare system was based upon the speculative boom on the world markets, in which London, as Britain's financial centre, was at the forefront. The financial and economic collapse in 2008 has undermined this, leading to a precipitous fall in passenger numbers. LU reported its biggest monthly fall in 20 years, with 190,000 fewer journeys made in August 2009 compared to the same month the previous year, a decline of 6.4 percent. The decline is even sharper when it is taken into account that the previous year had witnessed the highest number of passengers in the Underground's 146-year history. Reduction in journeys to central London and the capital's financial district is a major factor in the drop.

In addition to this, there is the continued unravelling of PPP. In 2007, Metronet, the consortium contracted to maintain three-quarters of the infrastructure, went into administration. The Labour government provided TfL with £1.7 billion to pay off the consortium's creditors. The National Audit Office estimates that there was a shortfall of some £410 million between the value of the work completed by Metronet and taxpayers' money spent on the bailout. TfL took the work back in-house, and this cost makes up a large part of the cuts programme. In June last year, TfL announced a postponement of overdue upgrades to the network plus 1,000 job losses, which it claimed would reduce the funding gap by £2.5 billion.

The entire PPP project is close to collapse, as the sole remaining private consortium involved has entered into a dispute with TfL over the rates on remuneration for maintenance work over the next seven years. Tube Lines has demanded £5.75 billion while TfL has offered £4 billion. The PPP Arbiter has been called in and set a figure of £4.4 billion. This still leaves an additional £400 million for TfL to find and a gap of £1.35 billion in funding Tube Lines' maintenance programme.

Any cost savings will be made either at the expense of Tube Lines' workforce, or by relaxing the terms of its contract with regard to safety, or both. Tube Lines has already requested to be released from established safety procedures by reducing twice-weekly inspection of tracks to once a week. It plans a similar reduction of inspections on station escalators, which risks another Kings Cross disaster when 31 people were killed in 1987 due to a fire starting under the escalators because of poor housekeeping and maintenance.

The RMT's opposition to these attacks has been whittled down to calls for the arbitration service to intervene and to pressure the London Mayor to keep to his election promises. RMT General Secretary Bob Crow stated, "Boris Johnson, the Chair of TfL, was elected by Londoners on an explicit manifesto pledge to ensure a manned ticket office at every station. RMT challenges the Mayor to stick by that pledge and demand the binning of this cuts plan or stand exposed as a hypocrite who rips up key manifesto commitments to the voters who put him in office."

Such entreaties merely pander to the image that has been fostered by the mass media of Johnson as a political maverick, rather than the reality, that he is squarely on the right of the Conservative Party and an implacable defender of the interests of the wealthy and business elite. These miserable appeals sum up the role of the RMT as an obstacle to the defence of jobs and services. The rank-and-file can only overcome this by breaking with the union's organisational structures and programme, which are determined by the requirements of capital rather than working people.

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