

London Underground cuts 800 jobs

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9 August 2010

London Underground (LU) is now in the process of implementing the 800 job cuts it announced earlier in the year and is conducting a major restructuring programme at the expense of working conditions and the safety of the travelling public.

In order to oppose this, Tube staff must break free from the restraints of the trade unions and wage a political struggle against the representatives of the financial elite in the London Assembly and Westminster.

The Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) eventually decided to ballot their members on strike action over the job cuts and reduced opening hours at 250 ticket offices. However, LU has already announced that 175 jobs have been cut by its decision not to cover vacancies.

While the majority of the job losses will fall on ticket office staff, a situation in which entire stations are left unstaffed, is becoming increasingly commonplace. LU figures showed that in the six months ending in March 2010, surface stations on four lines were left unmanned on 439 occasions. One station alone was left unstaffed for 95 entire shifts. This leaves public safety deeply compromised in the event of an accident or general emergency.

LU has made it clear that the job losses will be facilitated by a corresponding increase in the exploitation of the remaining staff. Management have outlined plans to restructure work groups to downgrade supervisors and impose rosters on staff that will make any obligation to work/life balance a thing of the past. Rosters are being drawn up in which ticket office staff will have to work 10 weekends in 12.

Additionally, LU continues the use of disciplinary procedures to realise job losses. A driver with a 33-year spotless record was removed from his post following an accident involving a passenger caused by management failure to fix faulty train mirrors. On July 21 his colleagues—members of Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF)—staged a one-day walkout in his defence.

LU has now announced that it believes it has 300 more drivers than is required. The demand for wider job cuts has

emboldened the Conservative Party group on the London Assembly to demand the mayor introduce driverless trains across the network. The stated aim of this automation is not solely greater cost-cutting but the elimination of any further resistance within the workforce.

Under these conditions, all talk about the 800 job losses being resolved through displacement is simply that. It is clear that no job is safe and that all grades are under threat. However, the unions continue to enforce sectional divisions, stifle opposition and seek to find common ground with management. The critical role in this is played by RMT General Secretary Bob Crow, whose left talk acts as a cover for preventing any effective class opposition.

While the RMT points to the fact that LU management are carrying out the job cuts by stealth, it is the union that has paved the way for this. It is the direct outcome of its betrayal of the strike movement that developed last year. Following the 48-hour strike in June 2009 the RMT claimed to have secured job protection based upon an agreement that there would be no compulsory redundancies. It then overturned a mandate for strike action in January to impose a meagre pay deal that it had previously described as unacceptable.

In practice the RMT and TSSA have collaborated with the practices management have introduced to downgrade ticket offices and make the job cuts. LU has been given a free hand to resort to extortionate measures to drive passengers away from the ticket office and use the machines. It has made the minimum top-up fees on Oyster cards five times more expensive at the former than the latter. Both unions have left their members in the invidious position of abiding by this practice—aimed at eliminating their jobs—or face possible disciplinary action. The subsequent drop-off in sales at the ticket office has been used to further buttress management's argument for closing ticket offices and axing jobs.

The RMT has a long history of using the pretext of no compulsory redundancies to forestall effective opposition to the undermining of the public transport system and the pay and conditions of Tube workers. This was the pretext upon which the RMT called off the strike movement in 2001 against the Labour government's part privatisation of the network. This was the pretext upon which the union allowed

the transfer of 6,000 London Underground workers to the private sector companies that took over the infrastructure. It drove a wedge between maintenance workers and staff on the station and train operations side allowing Public Private Partnership (PPP) to be pushed through in 2003.

The central preoccupation of the RMT and the other unions is to ensure they remain embedded in the negotiating machinery. In his letter to members regarding the strike ballot Crow stated, “Over the last few months have been meeting with senior management to get them to negotiate in a sensible way over these issues that will affect your future. LUL have rejected all our efforts to reach an agreement and have refused to go to ACAS [the arbitration service], in breach of their own machinery of negotiation”.

It has been management’s refusal to include union leaders in its further plans that has resulted in the strike ballot. In the hands of the RMT the strike ballot is not the starting point for a fight back but a bargaining chip with management to persuade them that the union’s services must be retained in order to forestall mounting opposition.

The opposition to genuine working class unity in the industrial struggle is bound up with the RMT’s promotion of cross party alliances with the political representatives of the financial elite. Crow’s empty rhetoric is in inverse proportion to his pro-capitalist program.

In the *RMT News* he stated, “Make no mistake, this is fiscal fascism in all its Thatcherite glory being propped up by the Lib Dems, a government with no mandate imposing savage cuts at the behest of big business and the central banks. As a result, the billions the bankers have creamed off in bailouts will be chewed up and spat back in our faces as cuts”.

However, in practice, the RMT has mounted a campaign to win support from these self same unabashed representatives of the wealthy elite. The RMT “Staff Our Stations” campaign consists of writing postcards and letters to the Conservative Party Mayor Boris Johnson to reverse the job losses. They point to the empty promises he made to win election in 2008 and base their calculations upon the need for him to save his political hide. The RMT has called on him to “Stand up for Londoners”.

An alliance with such an arch right-winger and representative of class privilege on this basis can only serve to divide the working class. Based upon this line-up of political forces the cuts envisaged for LU would simply be diverted to other public services. The only other function the “Staff Our Stations” provides is a public relations exercise for the Labour Party, now in opposition, to pose as defenders of public transport.

No struggle in defence of jobs and working conditions can proceed on this basis. Tube workers are being made to pay

twice for the failure of market driven policies of the Labour government and its Conservative/Liberal successor. Firstly, the Labour government’s opening up of the network to private operators in 2003 through PPP has been an unmitigated disaster. This was based upon the free-market mantra that it would create efficiency and transfer financial risk to the private sector.

The maintenance of the infrastructure has now been taken back off the two consortiums that were awarded 30-year contracts for its upkeep. The high dividends that were paid out to company shareholders were at the expense of critical maintenance work and the pay and conditions of engineering and maintenance workers that were transferred from the public sector.

In 2007 the Labour government stepped in to bail out Metronet—the consortium contracted to maintain three-quarters of the network’s infrastructure—after it went into administration. Transport for London (TfL), the parent body of LU, was provided with £1.7 billion to pay off the consortium’s creditors. In June the remaining consortium—Tube Lines—was bought out by TfL with £310 million being paid to its shareholders. TfL also assumed its debts after a long running dispute over fees it was charging for maintenance upgrades.

The Conservative/Liberal coalition’s drive to reduce the budget deficit due to the bailout of the banks will mean the central government grant to TfL will be cut over the coming year by £108 million. This is part of overall cuts in the transport budget nationally. Underlying the cost-cutting exercise of LU—such as the £16 million it estimates will be saved yearly from the 800 job losses—is the transfer of public finance into the coffers of the private sector and the enrichment of the financial elite.

Tube workers must take the struggle out of the hands of the unions and establish a rank-and-file committee to unify strike action across all grades. The defence of jobs, conditions and safety standards is directly at odds with the austerity program being imposed by the Conservative/Liberal government. Tube workers must link up their struggle with a broader movement in opposition to the cuts in public spending and reject the concerted demands to force the working class to pay for the economic failure of the capitalist system.



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