

London Underground workers strike to protest job losses and cuts

Our correspondent
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Around 10,000 maintenance staff, drivers, signallers and station staff employed by London Underground (LU) took strike action beginning Monday evening. The strike was called in opposition to plans to impose 800 job losses among a total workforce of around 19,000. These include an announced 450 jobs at ticket offices and 150 to 200 other station posts. Underground workers fear that the cuts will have a detrimental impact on safety and working conditions.

The 24-hour action had a widespread impact and led to the near closure of nearly every line on the capital's subway system, on which 3.5 million Underground journeys are made on a normal weekday. The stoppage began when 200 maintenance workers walked off the job at 5 p.m. local time, with other workers joining the strike four hours later.

The strike, the first of four planned 24-hour stoppages, was called by Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) and the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, as part of an ongoing dispute with Transport for London (TfL).

The strike resulted in the partial suspension of the Bakerloo, Victoria, District, Central, Piccadilly, Hammersmith and City, Jubilee and Metropolitan lines. More than 70 stations were forced to close as a result. While limited service operated on the Northern Line, many of the stations on the route were closed.

According to the chief executive of the London Chamber of Commerce, Colin Stanbridge, each day of strike action on the Underground would cost the economy £48 million.

TfL attempted to restrict the impact of the strike by mobilising an extra 100 buses, as well as using taxi ranks and laying on an extra 10,000 more passenger journeys on Thames riverboat services. Some 2,000 extra journeys on the cycle hire scheme were also supplied as well as escorted bike rides.

In a demonstration of LU's scant regard for safety, one of the issues central to the dispute, the RMT said it was collating evidence for the Office of Rail Regulation regarding alleged further breaches carried out by management during the action.

In a statement Tuesday the RMT said that "a limited 'shuttle service' is running non-stop from Marylebone to Queens Park passing through six closed stations—a clear breach of the fire regulations that stipulate if three stations in a row are closed the service should be suspended as an incident in a tunnel would make safe evacuation impossible".

The RMT said that trains were still being allowed to run through the District Line where Embankment, Temple, Blackfriars and Mansion House are closed, in a breach of regulations.

In another incident the RMT noted that 150 passengers were "dumped off a train on the Central Line at Leytonstone and forced to climb over fences to get out of the closed station after managers were caught out trying to run an understaffed service and were forced to cancel in mid-stream".

The action by the Underground workers met with a stream of invective

and anti-strike rhetoric from the political and media elite. The BBC's televised coverage of the strike consisted mainly of interviews conducted with irate passengers.

The *Daily Mail* condemned the strike and the ongoing dispute by British Airways cabin crew staff, stating, "The public face major travel disruptions as union militants plan a wave of 70s-style industrial action".

In a comment entitled "Little Hitlers", the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sun* newspaper compared the strikers' action with that of the fascist bombing of London, the 70th anniversary of which is currently taking place. RMT leader Bob Crow was denounced as a "bully" and compared to Hitler.

The comments in the media in denouncing the strikes are mainly aimed at their concern over the development of a broader movement in the working class against the unprecedented austerity measures that are set to be announced on October 20 by the Conservative/Liberal coalition government.

Warning of an "autumn of strikes", the *Sun* concluded, "let's summon up that Blitz spirit and tell bullies where to go".

The attacks being carried out on London Underground workers' jobs and conditions are just the initial phase of massive cuts that are being prepared. The government has instructed all departments, with the exception of two, to prepare for cuts of between 25 and 40 percent. Cuts on this scale at the Department for Transport would necessitate major attacks on the Underground workforce and London's transport infrastructure as the TfL accounts for nearly a quarter of the Department's budget. The London Underground itself accounts for some 45 percent of TfL's revenues.

Stephen Glaister, director of the RAC Foundation and a former TfL board member, said that such cuts "will force the pace on industrial relations issues". Glaister added, "There is probably scope to reduce the cost of operations at London Underground because it is heavily unionised and has not been subjected to competitive pressures".

Tony Travers, director of the Greater London group at the London School of Economics, said that upgrading the capital's transport network was necessary, but this would mean a sharp confrontation with the workforce.

Travers said, "Preserving the upgrades will concentrate the reductions in spending on the parts of London Underground that are most strike-prone, which are the bits featuring the RMT, the TSSA and [drivers' union] Aslef. So it solves one problem but it creates many more".

For its part the RMT has sought to keep the dispute within the confines of a series of appeals to Conservative Party mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and demands for management to hold "meaningful talks". This is despite LU management refusing to back down on any of its attacks on the workforce and its compromising of safety.

The RMT and TSSA have deliberately drawn out the calling of any industrial action against LU. In August the unions eventually decided to ballot their members for strike action over the job cuts and reduced opening hours at 250 ticket offices. By that time LU had already cut 175

jobs as a result of its decision not to cover vacancies.

The RMT, with a membership of 80,000 throughout the transport sector, has refused to call on other transport workers in the capital or nationwide to support the struggle of the LU staff. Opposed to any struggle to mobilise transport workers in opposition to the massive attacks being imposed, the RMT has instead initiated an entirely bogus and pathetic “Staff Our Stations” campaign. The campaign calls on union members and the public to write postcards and letters to Boris Johnson, calling on him to reverse the job losses and “Stand up for Londoners”.

World Socialist Web Site reporting teams spoke to striking RMT and TSSA members at several London Underground stations during the strike, including at East Ham and Arnos Grove.

On the picket line at East Ham station several workers said that the station was being kept open by managers, and that strike-breakers were being allowed minor rule infringements, for example on dress code, that management have otherwise been using to discipline staff. Arnos Grove was also being kept open by managers.

One RMT member at East Ham said that workers felt that management had forced the strike.

Strikers at East Ham told the WSWs that whoever had come to power at the last election would have launched a cuts programme. One described the government as “just debt-collectors”.

One worker showed the WSWs team a letter protesting the proposed cuts in staffing numbers that had been written by staff at East Ham station. In the letter, workers pointed to two experiences of suicides on the network. On one occasion, with two members of staff to support them, “everything went smoothly in closing the station and suspending the service”, said the letter. On the other occasion they were working alone. It was “nearly impossible to deal with everything.... I had to get people off the train, try to comfort a witness, help the driver, and give customers information of what was going on”, the letter said.

Craig, who is employed as a train driver, spoke to the WSWs at Arnos Grove. He has worked on the Underground for 10 years.

He said, “There is going to be a lessening of the safety culture of the underground. At the moment when there is a problem, such as a person under a train, station staff are there to assist.

“There are also procedures that ensure the safety of the travelling public. The company wants to water down these procedures, given that if these cuts go through then there’ll be less staff to carry out these procedures as they are now. All the different disputes brewing at the moment across different industries have got the same root cause, and that is the government’s plans to make cuts in every area, especially in public services which they control”.

Craig commented on the fact that the cuts at London Underground are set to worsen as a result of the government’s austerity programme, saying, “Transport is set to lose between 25 percent and 40 percent of its expenditure. With TfL making 25 percent of the total expenditure, we’re in the firing line.

“It’s not just ticket office staff whose jobs are at stake. The company is trying to present it like that, but in reality ticket office staff perform a variety of tasks, such as working on gate lines and on the platform, so they are front line staff as well. In any case this is the thin end of a very large wedge. If they get these cuts through next year, they’ll be back for more. It won’t be the end of it”.

Craig said that what was required was for “all the unions in the country” to “get together and coordinate their actions, because all the austerity people are facing has the same root cause”. He added, “We should be working together and create a national movement across all industries to fight it”.

Asked by the team whether he thought the union bureaucracy was an effective vehicle for such a fight, he replied, “I would like to say otherwise, but to be honest with you I don’t think it is”.

At East Ham, a TSSA representative spoke of the fact that the union had only now, for the first time, participated in strike action. A TSSA member on the picket line read a previous WSWs article on the LU cuts being distributed by the team and said he was impressed by its analysis. He said that if management had made the cuts over a protracted period there would probably not have been a strike.

Aklek, a train driver at the Arnos Grove picket who has worked at the Underground for 10 years, summed up the attitude of workers who were critical of the negative media coverage of their industrial action.

Citing Monday’s *London Evening Standard* headline on the strike’s estimated £50 million cost, he said, “What about the millions they spent on the war which was totally unnecessary? That money could have been better spent on schools and hospital beds”. He added “Safety is paramount. It is vital for stations to be manned”.

On the East Ham picket, TSSA representative Andy Naughton gave a first-hand example of the importance of safety procedures, citing an incident where a passenger had threatened to jump under a train. While one member of staff talked the passenger back from the trackside, the other had called the police, alerted the oncoming driver, and taken other necessary precautions. “How could I have done that on my own?” Naughton asked.

TSSA members at East Ham pointed to the longer-term deterioration of services as a result of the cuts. They described how if drivers are late, overtime will no longer be paid, and that drivers will have to leave trains where they can. One striker said he had raised the question of providing tourists with travel information and had been told by a manager that “they’ll find their way round”.

Strikers said that although the media attention has been on cuts to station staff, the cuts will affect the transport system much more widely. On the East Ham picket, a worker showed WSWs reporters proposed roster changes for the East Ham Group—a network east of Plaistow on the District Line. The changes would cut hours and staffing, particularly among part-time staff. Workers expressed concern that part-time employees were being ignored in discussions of cuts.

One of the main aims of the privatisation of the London transport system was to divide workers across the network. An RMT member at East Ham spoke about the separation of Docklands Light Railway (DLR) staff from other Tube workers. He also acknowledged that there was little connection with workers on the c2c service that runs trains from Fenchurch Street and Liverpool Street to Shoeburyness in Essex, using the same network.

TSSA members at East Ham explained that jobs were already being lost with staff being downgraded to Customer Services Assistants (CSA). The workers told the WSWs that CSA earnings were protected for only three years, and pensions were also undermined.

Strikers said that the ultimate plan of Transport for London was the complete destruction of agreed conditions, with workers being sent anywhere on the line. Workers living in Essex spoke of the possibility of being told they must be in West London for a 5 a.m. shift. One striker said, of Transport for London, “They want no staff”.



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