

Rail unions confine London Underground workers to token strikes

Tony Robson
15 September 2010

The recent strike by London Underground (LU) workers against the axing of 800 jobs has only confirmed the role of the trade union bureaucracy in suppressing every manifestation of resistance to the escalating programme of government cuts.

The most remarkable feature of last week's one-day strike, one of six planned to be held each month, is that it is the first significant action to have taken place since the installation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition back in May. Over the past four months, not a day has passed without a fresh announcement of further cuts in public spending. But the opposition that exists to the destruction of vital social provision and the jobs and conditions of those who work in the public sector can find no outlet through the channels of the trade unions and Labour Party.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) meeting this week spoke vaguely of collective action against the cuts, but plans to do nothing practical until next March! Instead, it continues secret talks with senior Conservatives in preparation for a meeting between Prime Minister David Cameron and TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber.

The 24-hour stoppage of September 6-7 was the first time workers in the Rail and Maritime Transport union (RMT) and Transport and Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) have undertaken joint action in recent history. It involved around 10,000 Underground workers of all grades—maintenance, engineering, station and revenue, operational managers, drivers and signalling staff. Faced with this, LU only managed to keep 1 of the network's 11 lines operational. The others were either partially or totally suspended.

Even maintaining this level of service required the company to flout safety regulations as trains ran on lines where more than three stations were closed in a row—leaving passengers no means of evacuation. Less publicised was the one-day walkout the day before by 200 Alstom-Metro train maintenance workers at London Underground depots, who have been subjected to a lower tier of pay and conditions. They voted 7 to 1 in favour of strike action against a below-inflation pay offer.

The fact that LU was able to run even a depleted service was due to the main drivers' union, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), acting as strike-breaker in chief. While rank-and-file members of the union have been involved in local one-off strike action against victimisation and job cuts, the union opposed any joint action and kept the trains running on the day.

On the station side, the company was able to deploy TSSA members who had not been balloted to cover those on strike and open up stations. This was done under the threat of disciplinary action if they refused. The TSSA leadership washed their hands of responsibility for workers forced into this position. A statement by TSSA Regional Organiser Luke Chester instructing the members stated, "Members may, however, choose as a matter of individual conscience, not to cross a picket line."

"Members who so choose should be aware that such action is likely to put them in breach of contract, and may result in disciplinary action against them (including dismissal)."

Instead of threatening action should this occur, Chester merely offered the union's "advice, support and representation to any member facing disciplinary action".

In the run-up to the dispute, the company denied the unions had any mandate for the action due to the low turnout in the ballots conducted. The ballots of both the RMT and TSSA recorded majorities of 3 to 1 in favour of strike action, but based on a turnout of approximately one third of the membership. The turnout was not proof of opposition to the strike, which was solid, but a vote of no confidence in the readiness of the unions to prosecute a genuine struggle against management's agenda.

What passed for news coverage on the dispute was almost universally hostile to the workers. This extended from the right-wing tabloids to the nominally liberal *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror*. The BBC dropped any pretence of impartiality. In its attempt to turn public opinion against the strike, it focused purely on the disruption caused to commuters, which was given extensive coverage on its web site, while it dropped any mention of the strike or the real

issues involved from its prime time TV news broadcast at 6 p.m.

The *Guardian* followed suit with readers of its web site encouraged to send in accounts of their “ordeal”. It gave credence to the LU management’s contention that the 800 job losses were necessitated by the dropping off of sales at ticket offices, following the widespread use of the Oyster smartcard. However, the figures cited by the Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson and LU that ticket offices are now selling fewer than 10 tickets an hour applies to just 8 stations on a network of 260.

The claim that the company’s only motivation is to make better use of underworked staff and will not involve the elimination of jobs is a lie. LU stated back in July that it would realise 175 of the job losses by not filling existing vacancies. It has become increasingly commonplace for companies to resort to this practice, which forces the remaining workforce to absorb the workload of those who are not replaced. Ticket office staff are to be displaced to work elsewhere on stations in order to make job cuts among other grades, such as Customer Service Assistants.

LU has outlined plans to establish a skeleton staff across the network to undermine the minimum numbers that were established in the wake of the Kings Cross fire that claimed the lives of 31 people in 1987. Supervisors will be pulled away from safety-critical responsibilities in order to man ticket offices. New rosters have been drawn up to facilitate these job losses, under which staff will have less recovery time between rotating shifts and any claim to a work/life balance will be dispensed with through increased weekend working.

The ability of the propaganda of the mass media to gain any kind of traction is entirely dependent upon the absence of any appeal to the class issues posed by the TUC and Labour Party. Not one of the five contestants in the present Labour Party leadership contest made any public statement to defend the strike.

The comments of Barber on behalf of the TUC were focussed upon an appeal to Johnson to halt the cuts, even as he mounted a well-publicised strike-breaking operation involving the recruiting of volunteers, extra buses, river journeys and providing free bicycles.

Bob Crow, the general secretary of the RMT, plays a key role in covering the exposed left flank of the entire Labour and trade union bureaucracy. It was the RMT that tabled the resolution to the TUC calling upon it to provide the leadership to a “fight back against the coalition Government’s decision to unleash all out class warfare” based upon “generalised strike action and community resistance in the biggest public mobilisation since the anti-poll tax movement.”

Crow et al say nothing about the actual role played by the real TUC, as opposed to such mythical invocations of its leading struggles. It was the TUC that intervened to ensure the defeat of last year’s important national strike by postal workers—the most militant to have developed over the lifetime of the previous Labour government. Barber himself presided over closed talks between the Communication Workers Union and Royal Mail, which imposed a no-strike agreement and paved the way for a deal, including a pay cut and the closure of mail centres and job losses that are now under way.

Beneath the class struggle rhetoric, the RMT itself continues to collaborate with the management in dismantling the transport system as a public service and eliminating the gains workers had won in the past. It called off last year’s strike action on the pretext that an agreement on avoiding compulsory redundancies had safeguarded jobs. It then overturned a strike ballot in January to accept a pay deal it had described as unacceptable. The RMT has enabled the management to proceed with the job losses and change in workers’ practices by stealth. It offered no resistance to the policy of charging almost five times the amount for topping up the Oyster card at the ticket offices than the machines, in order to drive more customers away and buttress the argument for cutting jobs.

It was only under conditions in which LU management signalled it would bypass the unions in order to proceed with further restructuring that the RMT balloted for strike action. Its main concern is to ensure that it remains embedded in the negotiating machinery by using the strike as a bargaining counter. Far from launching a “generalised strike movement”, the RMT has limited its strikes to monthly one-day stoppages. It too has made constant appeals to Johnson to honour his election pledge to keep ticket offices open in 2008.

Such appeals help prepare the way for a defeat. Johnson’s plans are only the first instalment of far bigger cuts that are in the pipeline. The coalition’s spending review scheduled for October 20 will outline cuts in all government departments—including the Department for Transport—of between 25 percent and 40 percent. London Underground’s parent body, Transport for London, accounts for nearly a quarter of the Department for Transport’s budget.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact