Second round of strikes set for London Underground

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2 October 2010

Workers on London Underground (LU) are due to walk out October 3 in the second in a series of 24-hour strikes against the elimination of 800 jobs.

The first one-day stoppage on September 5-6 led to the near closure of the network as some 10,000 maintenance staff, drivers, signallers and station staff struck. Just one of the network's 11 lines was operational, with the others either partially or fully suspended.

The ongoing dispute demonstrates the depth of opposition to the axing of jobs, the dilution of safety standards and the imposition of unsocial work hours.

The series of one-day strikes is the first time that the Transport Salaried and Staffs Association (TSSA) has participated in strike action on LU. Its joint action with the Rail and Maritime Transport union (RMT) is indicative of workers' desire for a unified struggle across all grades. Train maintenance workers employed on London Underground depots by the private company Alstom-Metro are also due to take part in their second 24-hour strike the next day, after overwhelmingly rejecting a below-inflation pay offer.

Union claims that sufficient pressure will force Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson and Transport for London (TfL) into a U-turn over the job losses have no foundation. Talks between the unions and the management at the arbitration service ACAS on September 22 broke down after just six hours, as LU made clear that the 800 job losses were non-negotiable.

Management has stepped up its strikebreaking by using office staff to open up stations. These "Incident Station Supervisors" will be issued with safety licences after just three days' training. During the September action, safety regulations were flouted as trains ran on lines where more than three stations were closed in a row—leaving passengers no means of evacuation in the event of an emergency.

Richard Tracey—the London Assembly Conservative group transport chairman—has signalled his intention to press ahead with legislation banning strike action on the network altogether. "The Mayor needs to work with the government to introduce no strike legislation for the Underground," Tracey said. This is a measure that Johnson has been linked with since being elected mayor in 2008.

LU's refusal to countenance any retreat is made necessary by the fact that the cuts are only the thin end of a more generalised assault on the jobs and conditions of its 19,000 staff. Even before the ACAS talks got under way, a further 500 job losses were announced by LU. The redundancies are among staff previously employed by Tube Lines, which was bought out by TfL in June. It was the sole remaining consortium involved with track and signalling maintenance after the failure of the part-privatisation of the network introduced by the Labour government. In 2007, TfL was forced to take back Metronet, which had responsibility for maintenance of two thirds of the network, after it went into bankruptcy.

TfL accounts for nearly a quarter of the Department of Transport's budget. Any reductions will come on top of the £5 billion "efficiency savings" already announced by Johnson. Only last week, it was confirmed that the capital's bus services are to be squeezed, following an announced 40 percent cut in funding for subsidised fares for the unemployed, elderly and children.

In the face of these attacks, the trade unions are working to divide workers' opposition along sectional lines, with the actions by station staff and maintenance workers being kept separate and a day apart. The fact that LU was able to maintain any service during the previous strike was because the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) opposed any joint action and kept trains running. Management were also able to deploy TSSA members who had not been balloted to open up stations and provide cover for those in dispute.

Such practices make a mockery of the union's public statements that they intend to mobilise mass pressure to force management and the government to retreat. 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.

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Instead, the unions are working to limit opposition to the cuts to token strikes and all-party protest campaigns.

Following the collapse of the ACAS talks, RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said, “The Mayor and his transport officials cannot simply wash their hands of this dispute…. Rather than attacking us the Mayor, as Chair of TfL, should instruct his officials to put safety first and withdraw the cuts that they are bulldozing through without agreement and with complete disregard for the consequences.”

Sunday’s strike coincides with the opening day of the Conservative Party conference in Birmingham. The unions hope to utilise hostility to the coalition’s cuts to conceal their own role in facilitating the austerity measures, and to divert protest behind the Labour Party.

It is these considerations that account for the endorsement of a resolution on the LU workers’ strike by the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) last month, which “saluted the brave action” of the RMT and TSSA. The motion attributed the attacks on jobs and conditions solely to Johnson and the Conservatives and requested that the TUC “assists in leading a broad coalition of unions, community groups and service users” against the cuts.

The meaninglessness of this gesture of solidarity can be measured by the fact that it was endorsed by ASLEF. The same conference agreed to do nothing to fight the coalition’s £6 billion in spending cuts. There are to be no protests, let alone strikes, outside of a vague commitment to a national demonstration in six months’ time. Rather, the TUC warmly applauded its featured guest speaker, Mervyn King, governor of the Bank of England, who defended the austerity programme.

To reinforce the message, the TUC did not organise a single protest during Wednesday’s European “day of action” organised by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). This is despite the fact that the ETUC is led by former TUC general secretary John Monks.

More was involved in this decision than simply a desire to prevent anything from diverting attention from the Labour Party conference being held at the same time. The centrepiece of the speech by newly elected Labour leader Ed Miliband at the conference was his insistence that there could be “no truck with…irresponsible strikes” against the coalition’s package of cuts.

By “irresponsible” strikes, Miliband means any action that genuinely opposes the efforts of the ruling elite to force the burden of the crisis onto the backs of working people. Labour is fully committed to spending cuts. Its differences with the coalition centre purely on the political efficacy of imposing these measures in one go. The TUC leaders have made clear that they concur entirely with such injunctions.

Just as cynical was Ken Livingstone’s appearance at the Labour Party conference, where he postured as an ally of LU workers. Livingstone won the election as London mayor in 2000 after running as an independent candidate. In a shabby deal with the Labour leadership, he rejoined the Labour Party in 2004 as it was presiding over the disastrous Public Private Partnership on the tube network. During a strike by underground workers that year, he declared that if he were an RMT member he would scab on the dispute.

Livingstone has just won selection as Labour’s official candidate against Johnson in the 2012 mayoral election. Writing in the *Evening Standard*, September 29, he called on Johnson “to roll up his sleeves and solve this dispute” by negotiating with the RMT and TSSA, and challenged the mayor to public debates on transport services, amongst other issues. The upshot would be to “provide a springboard for a change of government, under Ed Miliband”, he said.

Such a prospect should send a shiver down the spines of all class-conscious workers. Less than five months after Labour was rightly kicked out of office, this right-wing party of big business is being touted by the trade unions as the salvation of working people.

To defeat the attack on jobs, pay and conditions at LU—as everywhere else—requires an entirely new perspective and forms of struggle. Rank-and-file committees must have as their orientation the development of a struggle against the capitalist economic and political setup that is responsible for destroying the livelihoods of millions, and against the Labour Party and the trade unions that function as its last line of defence.

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