

# Unions isolate London tube struggle as government prepares anti-strike legislation

Tony Robson, Robert Stevens  
5 October 2010

London Underground (LU) workers held a second 24-hour strike between Sunday and Monday evening against the elimination of 800 jobs by Transport for London (TfL). The stoppage involved joint action by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) covering some 10,000 workers composed of all grades from managerial, station staff and trains.

As with the first one-day stoppage on September 6/7, the majority of the network was brought to a standstill, with ten of the eleven Underground lines affected. TfL claimed the strike had a limited impact, and that 40 percent of services ran overall. This was disputed by the RMT who said the strike's impact was "massive and widespread".

London Underground has dismissed any suggestion that the job losses will have a negative impact on safety as "scaremongering". However, on both strike days the company has sacrificed safety in the course of its strike breaking activities.

The ability of London Underground to keep even a reduced train service running is due to the role of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen trade union (ASLEF), which has opposed joint action.

Both the RMT and TSSA have staggered the industrial action in order provide room for manoeuvre with the London Mayor Boris Johnson, who they claim can be pressurised into backing down over the job cuts. The RMT and TSSA had previously maintained that the mayor could be co-opted into standing up to central government and opposing its cuts.

As the strike began, it emerged that RMT leader Bob Crow and Gerry Doherty of the TSSA had written to Prime Minister David Cameron to personally intervene to end the dispute. The letter stressed that, "This strike is not about 'irresponsible militants' taking on the coalition; it is about London Underground staff giving up a day's pay to put safety first".

In a clear sign that the unions are ready to cave in to the demands of TfL, Crow called for new talks with management to start with a "blank piece of paper". Crow also pledged in a news conference that the union would suspend two further strikes in November if negotiations resumed without preconditions.

As workers stepped up their action to defend their jobs and livelihoods on the Underground, the demobilising role of the trade union bureaucracy was once again demonstrated as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) trade unions called off a planned two-day strike.

Journalists, technicians and other broadcast staff were due to walk out on October 5/6 in an ongoing dispute over pensions. The strike would have affected the BBC's coverage of the Conservative Party conference, with threats beforehand that Prime Minister David Cameron's speech would be taken off air.

In response to the planned industrial action, the right wing press denounced the BBC workers as opponents of democracy and demanded it be called off. Following an intervention into the dispute by Ed Miliband, the new leader of the Labour Party, demanding that no interruption be made to Cameron's speech, the various BBC trade unions quickly fell into line. They called off the action on the pretext that they would consider a "significant" new offer from the BBC.

In an article headlined, "Plea by Ed and strike is dead", the coalition supporting *Sun* tabloid commented, "A planned strike by BBC staff which would have blacked out David Cameron's Tory Conference speech was called off—thanks to Ed Miliband".

Miliband said, "Whatever the rights and wrongs of the dispute between Bectu [broadcasting trade union] and the BBC, they should not be blacking out the PM's speech".

The determination of tube workers to resist the destruction of their jobs and erosion of safety, and the pernicious role of the union bureaucracy has served to embolden the ruling elite. Johnson has now made it clear that tube workers must be taken on and defeated in order to set an example to the entire working class not to challenge the austerity program of the coalition government.

Johnson described the industrial action as "irresponsible politically motivated nonsense".

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* in terms reminiscent of former Conservative Party Prime Minister Thatcher, the mayor dismissed any idea of a compromise, "That is absurd, outrageous and wrong. We cannot reward the bad behaviour of militants whose objectives are plainly nothing to do with terms and conditions of their members, and everything to do with a political attack on the coalition government and, to a lesser extent, on City Hall".

Johnson chose the platform of the Conservative Party conference Monday as the occasion to launch a call for further amendments to anti-strike legislation in order to make them even more draconian. They are already amongst the most prohibitive in the industrial world. Johnson said of the LU strike, that 3,000 workers were "holding the city to ransom" and "were jeopardising our economic recovery". He demanded that any strike ballot be deemed invalid if it does not have the participation of over half the membership

rather than more than just a majority of votes cast.

The hypocrisy of this is truly breathtaking. Johnson was elected mayor based upon results in which less than half of those eligible participated. More importantly the Conservative-Liberal coalition is imposing sweeping attacks on living standards without any electoral mandate and having cobbled together a government with a little over 30 percent of eligible voters.

Johnson's call for new legislation to further curb the right to strike has gathered traction amongst sections of big business. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the main business organisation, has backed the call albeit with a lower qualification level of 40 percent voter participation. The CBI is also calling for a change in the law whereby firms have to recruit temps directly rather than go through an agency. This would be to ensure a standby strike breaking force.

WSWS reporters spoke to striking LU workers on the picket lines on Monday. The comments emphasised the frustration felt by many LU staff at the limited one day strike action and their hostility to the demands of the rich that working people shoulder the burden of the economic crisis.

Teresa and Susan were picketing outside Watford Metropolitan line station. Teresa explained the background of the dispute and said that many of the stations on the line are already undermanned, with long periods when there are no staff at all. She told the WSWS that she was concerned with how effective their strikes against TfL could be, as they were being held for just one day a month.

Susan added that it was not much use having four days of strikes over three months. It should have been four days continuous and made to hurt.

Teresa said, "There is a change in the balance of power going on around the world, to the rich. I don't know how it is happening, but we have to do something about it".

A ticket office clerk on the picket line at Harrow on the Hill station asked to remain anonymous.

He said, "First of all, we, the working class people have to work together and wake ourselves up. This is not the end but the beginning. Whether it is the rail, buses or social workers or doctors or nurses, they are all going to be affected. We have to mobilise ourselves or in reality we are not going to beat them".

"It's us that pay the taxes, but they who made the mess. Why do we poor people have to sacrifice, not the rich people?"

The worker asked, "Why do you think, the union wants to negotiate with the coalition government who defends the rich? I can't speak for the general secretary but I believe he is wrong.

"As I said we have to mobilise ourselves and show the government it's not all about money but about the defence of our livelihood. We are the people that always pay our taxes to them and we are the people that get kicked out first. Yes we have to talk to them, if it is constructive, but they are not doing that, we are not living in a democratic world".

The WSWS asked the worker what he thought about new Labour Party leader Ed Miliband demanding that "irresponsible strikes"

be opposed.

He replied, "I believe that party is becoming a rich people's party. It seems to me we need another local party that helps and cares about the ordinary people. We need a socialist party, that's my opinion".

Regarding the overall aims of the ruling elite and their plans to break the LU strike, he said, "They want to bring in the American system, you can hire a worker in the morning and fire him in the afternoon, this is capitalism.

"At Harrow we have six members of staff on duty at any one moment in time. With the cuts, they want four members of staff. But today, on a strike day with no ticket office and no gate line staff, they have 20 people manning the station. Twenty managers on today, and they want four during normal days. How can they justify this?

"The point is I am a poor man. I did not cause these financial problems, the spiralling debt and the bank bankruptcies. Yet I could be robbed out of my job, while they are still driving their Ferraris".

The line up of the coalition government, the London mayor, big business and an increasingly hysterical media against the tube workers and the rest of the working class demonstrates the need for workers to mount a political offensive, based on their independent class interests.

The only basis on which a successful struggle can be waged against the government's onslaught is for tube workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the trade unions and establish rank-and-file committees to unify strike action across all grades. LU staff must turn for support to other workers on the basis of a common offensive against the destruction of social gains won in more than a century of struggle.

The defence of jobs, conditions and safety standards is directly at odds with the austerity program being imposed by the Conservative/Liberal government. In the next weeks and months millions of workers will face the full brunt of unprecedented austerity measures. LU workers must link their struggle with a broader movement in opposition to the cuts.

Working people must reject the concerted demands to force the working class to pay for the economic failure of the capitalist system. It is impossible for workers to defend their jobs and living standards and to oppose imperialist war and attacks on democratic rights without an offensive against the financial aristocracy that dominates society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**