

London Underground workers on third one-day strike

Tony Robson
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London Underground workers will carry out the latest in a series of 24-hour walkouts today. This is the third one-day strike in as many months, organised to oppose job cuts, worsening conditions and the undermining of safety.

The stoppage, which starts at 21 hours, involves joint action by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and the Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), involving 10,000 workers across all grades. Fleet maintenance workers have been involved in industrial action short of a strike since October 26 over revised maintenance schedules that have left brakes and other critical equipment unrepaired and increased the intervals between inspections.

London Underground workers are confronted with not only a cost-cutting drive by the London mayor, but also the austerity programme of the national Conservative/Liberal Democrat government. The latest one-day stoppage takes place in the aftermath of the autumn spending review, in which the coalition government announced the largest public spending cuts in British history.

The cuts include a 25 percent reduction in the budget of the Department for Transport. Transport for London (TfL), the parent body of London Underground, accounts for nearly a quarter of the Department for Transport's budget.

The claim made by London Underground that the original plan to cut 800 job titles—mainly in the ticket office—involved little more than closing underused offices and redeploying staff more efficiently has been belied by its subsequent actions. The company's long-term objective of closing all ticket offices has been made explicit by the head of TfL.

In a recent interview with the *Guardian*, Peter Hendy said, "These bloody offices don't sell many tickets.... It is a waste of time. We don't intend ever to run stations with nobody on them."

The cuts in ticket office jobs are part of a far wider downsizing operation. Since the dispute began, London Underground has announced further job losses, bringing the combined total to more than 2,000. This includes sacking 400 undefined "support staff" and not filling 400 posts left

vacant or covered by temporary workers. In September, London Underground announced 500 job losses among former Tube Lines staff. These workers were employed by the failed private consortium involved in track and signalling maintenance work, which was brought back into government ownership in June.

The third one-day stoppage coincides with a wave of industrial unrest in the capital against austerity measures. London fire fighters struck on November 1 and are due to walk out again on November 5, Britain's Bonfire Night, after being issued dismissal notices and told to reapply for their jobs based on cost-cutting rosters. Journalists at the BBC are due to stage a 48-hour walkout on November 5 against an attack on pension entitlements.

In the last one-day strike, London Underground mobilised untrained agency staff to man stations. But there are growing calls from big business and the media for the government to mount a strike-breaking operation to defeat the strike and set an example for other workers.

In the London *Evening Standard*, Chris Blackhurst wrote that it was high time the coalition government mobilised a reserve army of strike-breakers. Citing the example of the Fire Authority's use of the private company Assetco, currently being deployed against London fire fighters, he stated, "So far, so good for the Government as it attempts to bring down the deficit. There haven't been mass protests, we've not been treated to Greek and French-style manning of barricades and blockades. Not yet. That's the abiding fear of ministers as the impact of the cuts begins to be felt.

"If Assetco emergency fire fighters can cope, could not the same be done for the 11 tube lines? Perhaps somewhere in the north of England, on a soon to close RAF base, a group of simulators for the different routes could be established to teach a stand-in workforce how to drive and manage London underground trains.

"Hand-picked recruits could be trained in secret and, when ready, held in reserve while the unions were presented with a tough ultimatum on strikes and asked to accept new contractual terms and conditions. Any who did not sign

would simply be deemed to have terminated their contract and sacked. Those who signed would join the new staff.”

He added, “It worked for Ronald Reagan in 1981 and he sacked more than 11,000 air traffic controllers and started again with a fresh crew. And it will soon be the 25th anniversary of Murdoch’s successful shock move to Wapping, with the sacking of more than 6,000 angry printers.”

The ruling elite are prepared to resort to the most draconian methods to enforce their will. This is in stark contrast to the trade union leaders, who oppose any practical unification of the struggles of the working class and seek to curtail every manifestation of opposition. At all times, the trade unions provide assurances that they accept the need for the cuts and differ only on the speed with which they are to be implemented.

A central role is being played by nominal “lefts” such as RMT General Secretary Bob Crow, who combines militant rhetoric with opposition to any serious challenge to the political establishment. There are safety grounds for closing London Underground on the days of the fire fighters’ strike, as vital emergency cover will be withdrawn that could have fatal consequences, particularly in the deep tunnel sections. However, rather than call its members out, the RMT has left them to state on an individual basis their refusal to work based upon safety considerations.

Limiting industrial action to a series of one-day stoppages is aimed at preventing a mass mobilisation, which would cut across the unions’ attempts to forge alliances with the political representatives of big business. Originally, the RMT claimed that the strikes would exert pressure on Tory Mayor Boris Johnson to perform a U-turn and “stand up” to central government. More recently, it has carried out a political flip-flop, calling on Tory Prime Minister David Cameron to intervene against Johnson!

Crow and the RMT have trumpeted the cross-party support established between the Liberal Democrats and Labour Party within the Greater London Assembly and the role of Labour lefts John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn in Parliament. In both instances, this is based on the presentation of motions that merely call upon the mayor to reconsider the job cuts.

These manoeuvres are aimed at deflecting rising public anger, as the impact of the cuts becomes apparent. Without the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives would not have been able to form a parliamentary majority to serve as a rubber stamp for its austerity programme.

The role of McDonnell and Corbyn is to provide a threadbare cover for the Labour Party as it continues its lurch to the right under new leader Ed Miliband.

Miliband has been most vociferous in denouncing “irresponsible” strikes and has dissociated himself from any

protests against the cuts, even refusing to attend the pathetic demonstration organised by the unions outside Parliament on the day the coalition government outlined its austerity package.

The RMT is taking steps to demobilise the strike action and signalling its willingness to deliver London Underground’s demands. On October 5, the union called off any further action by 200 tube maintenance workers employed by Alstom-Metro. They had participated in two 24-hour strikes that ran back-to-back with the previous one-day stoppages by London Underground workers.

The union has accepted the original below-inflation pay increase of 2 percent, which had been rejected by the work force in a vote by a seven-to-one margin in favour of strike action. On the pretext of a one-off payment of just £750 for 2010 for the lowest-paid workers and improved travel concessions, it has even pledged increased productivity.

On October 22, the RMT announced the lifting of an overtime ban among engineering workers that had led to major cancellations of maintenance work.

Both the RMT and TSSA have failed to protect staff from management intimidation over non-compliance with the policy of charging passengers more than four times as much to top up their travel cards at the ticket office than at the self-service machines. This was a deliberate ploy by management to drive down ticket office usage.

The unions collaborated with this when it was implemented earlier in the year, but on October 3 announced a boycott. The RMT and TSSA described this as ramping up the action, but London Underground management has been allowed a free hand to threaten staff taking part with disciplinary measures.

London Underground workers must break out of the political straitjacket the RMT and TSSA have placed around the dispute. Their struggle can go forward only if it is taken out of the hands of the trade unions and led by rank-and-file committees prepared to wage a militant struggle alongside workers throughout both the public sector and private sector who are facing savage cuts and austerity measures.



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