

Unions undermine London Underground jobs fight

Tony Robson
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London Underground (LU) workers took part in a third one-day stoppage on November 3. The strike started the previous evening and involved joint action by the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and the Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) against plans to shed over 2,000 jobs. Some 11,000 workers across all grades, from engineering and maintenance to station staff and train drivers, took part.

Unlike the first stoppage in September, which was the only major dispute to take place since the coalition took office, the latest walkout is part of an incipient strike movement against austerity-driven measures. London fire fighters staged a second 24-hour strike the day before against the issuing of 5,500 dismissal notices and demands that they reapply for their jobs on inferior contracts.

There were skirmishes on the picket lines with scabs and police, leading to two strikers being hospitalised as the London Fire Brigade mobilised a strike-breaking operation with the private company AssetCo. Fire fighters are due to walk out again on November 5, when journalists at the BBC are to launch a two-day strike against the erosion of pension entitlements.

Figures released in a new report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development estimate that as many as 1.6 million jobs will be lost over the next five years as a result of the cuts announced by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government in its October 20 spending review.

The strike by London Underground workers again brought most of the service to a standstill. All of the network's eleven lines faced severe disruption. The *London Evening Standard* reported 80 stations closed and 100 stations picketed. The Northern Line, which LU had made a major show of keeping open during the last two stoppages, compromising safety in the process,

had only one third of its stations open. LU's parent body, Transport for London (TfL), claimed that up to 40 percent of the network was operating. These figures were disputed by the RMT, which accused LU of operating "ghost trains" that ran through stations where passengers could not board because of closures.

TfL laid on contingency transport arrangements in an attempt to mitigate the impact of the strike, in the form of 100 extra buses, riverboats providing 10,000 extra journeys, taxis and bicycles. However, there is a growing demand amongst sections of the ruling elite that this should be escalated into a direct clampdown. Representatives of big business in particular renewed calls for more draconian anti-strike legislation. Confederation of British Industry (CBI) Deputy Director General John Cridland stated, "This is a big disruption caused by a small union minority—and that shouldn't happen."

The CBI is demanding that strikes should only go ahead if 40 percent of the total workforce votes in favour, as well as a simple majority of those voting. In addition to demanding voting criteria that most parliamentary elections would fail to meet, the CBI has also called for the notice of strike action being extended from 7 to 14 days.

While the financial elite and big business call for more repressive measures to break all resistance, the initial opposition in the working class has confirmed that the main obstacle to a genuine mobilisation is the trade unions.

The fact that LU has managed to keep any type of service operating during the dispute is thanks to the main drivers' union, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF). On November 3—as has been the case with the other one-day stoppages—ASLEF broke the strike and kept the

trains running. Without this, the LU's desperate measures of using unqualified managers and agency staff to open stations would have come to naught. Neither TSSA, nor the RMT under the leadership of Bob Crow, has issued any public criticism of this betrayal or issued any appeal to rank-and-file ASLEF members—who in some instances have refused to cross picket lines.

Under conditions in which the London fire fighters' action provides a basis to close the transport network outright, due to lack of emergency cover, the unions have refused to take this step. Instead they have told their members to make a decision on whether to work on an individual basis. And then only if they are not prepared to accept the assurances from management that contingency arrangements have been put in place—the same management that the RMT and TSSA have stated should not be trusted with safety.

Instead, at the very moment in which a real potential exists to extend the fight and open up a new front against the government and its austerity programme, the response of the RMT and TSSA is to offer LU a truce and call off any further action over Christmas.

Gerry Doherty, General Secretary of TSSA, stated, "It will not be my intention to disrupt festivities. I will not be recommending to my members that they strike over Christmas and the New Year."

Bob Crow stated, "We are urging the London Mayor to get everyone together to see what common ground there is."

The issue at hand is not merely stringing out one-day strikes over an indefinite period, but waging an intransigent struggle to defend workers' hard-won rights. To talk of common ground under conditions in which class war has been openly declared can only prepare the basis for an abject capitulation.

The RMT is to go into arbitration talks with LU the day after the strike, even under conditions in which TSSA has refused to participate because the company has refused to review its axing of the jobs of 150 station managers. The conditions are being prepared to drive a wedge between workers of the two unions, which have for the first time in history taken part in joint strike action against the London Underground.

Whether these talks produce a sell-out or not, the whole course of action by the unions points in a definite direction. The RMT is already sending signals

to management. It has begun to scale back even the limited industrial action it has championed up until now. It has called off the overtime ban among engineering workers and the one-day strikes by Alstom-Metro maintenance workers, which took place back-to-back with the other 24-hour stoppages by LU workers, instead accepting the previously rejected pay increase of two percent.

This is not new territory for Crow and the RMT. In 2001 they played the central role in calling off the strike movement against the part-privatisation of the network, delivering a political bailout to the Blair Labour government. Long experience demonstrates that the struggle of London Underground workers cannot be entrusted to the unions. It must be taken out of their hands and taken forward by the rank-and-file, as part of the growing offensive by workers in the public and private sector against the government's drive to tear up what remains of workers' hard-fought rights and entitlements.



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