

Management reject rail unions' offer to call off London strike action

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London Underground (LU) has rejected an offer from the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) to end further strike action over the Christmas and New Year period against the elimination of over 2,000 jobs. For three days, the unions and LU management were involved in talks at the arbitration service aimed at reaching an agreement ahead of the next one-day strike due to begin Sunday evening.

While the fourth one-day stoppage by some 11,000 tube workers across grades looks set to proceed, the RMT-TSSA offer is further proof that the fight to defend jobs and safety cannot be entrusted to the unions. The RMT and TSSA have demonstrated that they are prepared to accept a sell-out deal. The only reason this has not come to pass is that LU management is not interested in compromise.

The RMT and TSSA proposed to suspend strike action in exchange for nothing more than an undertaking from management to lift the job cuts temporarily while an evaluation was conducted. Neither union could point to any significant shift—let alone a U-turn—by management that could have justified their offer. Both unions agreed that the evaluation process over jobs and safety would be conducted on a station-by-station basis, thus paving the way for the division of the workforce.

The RMT and TSSA had called for this process to be undertaken over 12 weeks. But LU management wanted it restricted to six weeks, together with a minor delay in its plans to implement the reduction in staffing levels by February 2011—i.e., in two months' time.

The day before the talks collapsed, the leaders of the RMT and TSSA were in a self-congratulatory mood and keen to laud management's motives. RMT General Secretary Bob Crow stated, "After many hours of talks we have now pinned down the issue of the station-by-station safety

review, the mechanism for that review and the timescale to allow it to be carried out thoroughly taking into account the looming Christmas and New Year period."

Gerry Doherty, TSSA general secretary, proclaimed pompously, "In the words of the Rufus Wainwright song, the road is long, with many a winding turn. However, it would seem after long discussions at ACAS [Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service], with many turns, that London Underground management have finally arrived at a point where they are willing to at least consider suspending their unnecessary job cuts programme to allow for a meaningful safety and customer service review."

In reality, these manoeuvres have only led tube workers down a dead end.

LU management have taken the measure of the union's token resistance. In dismissing the evaluation process, Peter Hendy, head of LU's parent body Transport for London, stated, "The fact is that the TSSA and RMT leaderships are not facing reality, and are determined to inconvenience Londoners by striking over post reductions, many of which have already happened. More than half of the 800 post reductions have been achieved—150 management and administrative staff have taken voluntary severance, and 300 vacant stations posts will not be filled."

Hendy had told the *Guardian* in October that ticket offices—the closures of which are at the centre of the dispute over job losses—"were a bloody waste of time."

The cynicism of the unions in promoting the evaluation process as "meaningful" is underlined by the fact that only last week the RMT leaked an LU internal memo that acknowledged that stations were being left unmanned and this would become an increasing phenomenon. The London Mayor announced that as part of the anticipated 2,200 jobs losses, the workforce at the Safety Directive would be

halved from 127 to 65.

The RMT and TSSA have been left clutching at straws because the perspective they advanced of exerting pressure on London's Conservative Mayor and the coalition government has totally unravelled. This is why they confined the industrial action to a series of one-day stoppages from the start. Far from representing the beginning of a militant offensive, the unions' protest actions were aimed at forestalling such a development.

Since the dispute began, the struggle has become more explosive. LU's stance has not only become more entrenched, but increasingly belligerent. The number of jobs singled out by the company for cutting has more than doubled. This has taken place within the context of a mass media campaign painting tube workers as overpaid and workshy. The aim is to justify demands for more repressive anti-strike laws called for by the representatives of big business, such as the Confederation of British Industry. Sections of the ruling elite have appealed for state-organised strike-breaking to inflict a defeat on tube workers that would serve as a deterrent to other workers.

While the ruling elite reserves the right to politicise the dispute and make clear that tube workers' resistance must be crushed to pave the way for austerity measures, the main obstacle in the way of the working class developing a political movement capable of defeating this onslaught is represented by the nominal "lefts" such as Crow.

Crow employs empty left rhetoric to conceal a programme of class collaboration. While he denounces the austerity measures of the coalition government, with the support of the financial elite, corporate media and judicial system, as "fiscal fascism", in the current dispute he has promoted the line that the coalition government and mayor can be forced to change their policies. Crow has used the left credentials he has been handed by the media and various middle class opportunist groups to uphold the authority of the Labour Party and the trade unions as these organisations become increasingly discredited in the working class.

The previous one-day strike by tube workers on November 3 coincided with an incipient strike movement involving London fire fighters and BBC journalists. Crow and the RMT prevented any practical unification of these struggles and enforced its isolation. Tube workers were forced to keep the network running in unsafe conditions, where there was insufficient emergency cover in the event of a fire. Similarly, Fire Brigades Union leader Matt Wrack quickly suspended

the planned 48-hour firefighters' strike.

The RMT has worked to prevent a mass mobilisation of rail workers against job cuts and increased exploitation. In April, the first national strike on the railways since 1996 was due to take place against Network Rail and its plans to impose 1,500 job losses and change in work practices. After a High Court injunction against the action, Crow vowed to re-ballot the members, but instead went into binding arbitration. The RMT has just pushed through a deal that will implement the job losses on the proviso of avoiding compulsory redundancies, while agreeing to productivity-based pay increases facilitating the reduction in staff.

On Docklands Light Railway, in the nation's capital, the RMT overturned two emphatic ballots for strike action in June and August against unpaid increases in the workload through the introduction of trains with an additional carriage. It pushed through a deal based upon a one-off payment of £600 that the company is now clawing back through speed-up.

Tube workers can only advance their struggle by breaking from the RMT and TSSA and the political straightjacket they have imposed on workers in this dispute. They must unite their struggle with other sections of workers and youth who are opposing the austerity-driven measures dictated by the coalition government and its accomplices in the Labour Party and TUC.



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