

Rail unions enable the axing of 800 London Underground jobs

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London Underground (LUL) has eliminated 800 jobs thanks to the capitulation of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA).

Some 10,000 tube workers across all grades took part in four separate one-day stoppages towards the end of last year in opposition to the jobs cull. The joint action was the first time TSSA had been on strike since the 1926 General Strike.

However, as the February 6 deadline approached, the unions scaled back the action, firstly calling off the overtime ban over the Christmas and New Year and then ensuring that no further strikes took place.

The RMT and TSSA effectively enforced binding arbitration, while LUL rejected any compromise and unilaterally imposed the job losses. Management went ahead and issued the displacement notifications and new rosters, minus the jobs.

The majority of the job losses have been in the ticket offices, but there has been a drastic reduction of station staff overall. Wembley Park has lost almost a third of its rostered customer service assistants—reduced from 20 to 14—while at Canary Wharf they have been more than halved from 25 to 11. The impact of the new rosters has meant staff being displaced to stations far away, with part-timers being forced to work outside their group. In some instances, staff has been served with incorrect station placements. It has also led to increased weekend working.

Tube workers have been served with an ultimatum to accept or leave.

Ticket offices are understaffed or closed most of the day, under conditions in which the number of passenger journeys is projected to pass 1.1 billion in the current financial year, beating the previous record set of 1.089 billion in 2008-2009—a 17 percent increase over the

past seven years. The number of passengers carried on London buses and tube combined is 3.4 billion annually, the equivalent of half the world's population. LUL's criteria for establishing manning levels is based on the Business Needs Schematics (BSE), which is geared exclusively to enabling the £5 billion worth of savings required due to the costly failure of part-privatisation and the austerity measures of the government. The RMT has stated that the latest operational plans will mean that of the 249 stations, 76 are scheduled to be left unstaffed for part of the day as no cover will be available for breaks.

The unions have justified calling off any further strike action on the basis of participating in a review procedure that is limited to assessing the impact of the job losses after their implementation. Their sole concern is to preserve their niche within the industrial relations apparatus.

Peter Hendy, the chief commissioner of Transport for London, boasted, "Some of our staff lost four days pay but the RMT got absolutely nothing from us."

He said the staggered industrial action organised by the unions were totally ineffective, commenting, "Ten years ago if we'd had a dispute with the RMT we wouldn't have run a train."

The RMT and TSSA made no criticism of the strike-breaking role of the drivers' union, ASLEF, nor made any appeal to its members to support the dispute.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow, who employs militant-sounding rhetoric, in practice opposed any steps to extend the struggle of tube workers to broader sections of the working class. Such a struggle could only be realised in direct conflict with the Labour Party and trade unions. Instead, Crow sought to utilise the strike to lend credence to his claim that the TUC must lead a fight back against the government, when it has

instead given the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats a free hand to impose austerity measures.

From the outset, Crow made constant entreaties to the Conservative mayor of London, Boris Johnson, insisting that he could be forced to make a U-turn and honour his election promise to keep ticket offices open. Crow and the RMT actively promoted a “cross party consensus” between the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats in the Greater London Assembly as the chief means through which the attack on tube workers jobs and conditions and undermining of public safety could be defeated.

In November, when the firefighters and BBC journalists took part in industrial action, the possibility of extending the struggle was there. Rather than seeking unified action, Crow offered to call off the last one-day stoppage on November 29 during arbitration. LUL management was disinterested. While stalling strike action over the Christmas and New Year to satisfy management, Crow claimed that the RMT was preparing to escalate the strike if management did not relent. “I will not be recommending any strike action this side of 2 January, but come 2011 we will have to consider escalating the strikes to more than one day,” he blustered.

The RMT adopted an outraged tone, denying a BBC report in January that it had decided not to organise any further industrial action. The RMT General Grade Council wrote that it was “appalled at the BBC’s report this morning that RMT will not strike against London Underground job cuts in January. This report, attributed to a ‘highly placed RMT source’ is in straightforward contradiction to the decision of the GGC taken on 7th January 2011. We instruct the General Secretary to issue an immediate statement to the press and to our members clarifying our positions.”

Needless to say, the BBC was telling the truth and the RMT was lying through its teeth to cover its planned betrayal. The RMT and TSSA even dropped the limited precondition that the jobs cuts be temporarily suspended while the review procedure took place. Three days before the February 6 deadline, Crow announced that the union would not be pursuing any further strike action. In his letter to members, Crow wrote of the RMT’s “determined stance against the cuts” having failed to prevent management introducing new rosters on February 6 “without our agreement.

Nevertheless we remain involved in detailed discussions to try to protect members.”

No section of the RMT executive or local officials made any stand against this continued collusion with LUL. The ex-left groups have given their usual benediction to the RMT’s betrayal. Janine Booth, of the Alliance for Workers Liberty, who was elected recently to the RMT executive, presents binding arbitration and a worthless review procedure as some kind of alternative form of action to defend jobs, rather than a mechanism for suppressing any such struggle.

Booth wrote on her web site, “RMT and TSSA continue to oppose these job cuts. The unions have not called further strike dates at present, but continue to take ‘action short of strikes’ to keep the pressure on management.

“The two unions are taking part in a review of the job cuts, overseen by the conciliation service ACAS, which we hope will lead to many of the jobs being restored.”



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