

The trade unions and the ex-left: A reply to a British union official

Tony Robson
10 May 2011

The *World Socialist Web Site* received a complaint from Janine Booth, a member of Alliance for Workers Liberty and Rail Maritime and Transport Executive (Region 11 London Transport), regarding the article entitled “Rail unions enable the axing of 800 London Underground jobs”. The article provided a critical evaluation of the role Booth played in the RMT and its decision, along with the Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), to call off joint one-day stoppages and enforce binding arbitration in the run-up to the job losses implemented on February 6.

Booth wrote, “This article completely misrepresents my actions since being elected to RMT’s Executive. I proposed the escalation of strike action but was defeated in the vote on the union’s Executive. Perhaps you would like to publish a correction?”

No such correction is required. We did not misrepresent in any way Booth’s actions. She was upset only because her double bookkeeping was subjected to scrutiny.

Booth claims that she fought to escalate strike action, but is then on record as endorsing the RMT Executive’s decision to call off the strike.

For her, the RMT Executive has the final word on the issue even when it entails riding roughshod over the mandate of the membership in order to impose a sellout. This exposes Booth’s pretensions and that of the Alliance for Workers Liberty, of which she is a leading member, and its web site, Tubeworker, to offer an alternative for the rank and file.

Booth was elected onto the Executive in January based upon her claim to be a socialist and representative of the rank and file. The Tubeworker stated that Booth stood for: “No compromise with the job cuts... The key focus of her campaign was increasing rank-and-file control in the union and

developing assertive industrial strategies designed to win. With the jobs dispute on London Underground now at a key juncture, the presence of a rank-and-file socialist like Janine on the union’s national leadership could make a real difference.”

How have Booth’s actions stood up to this claim?

The article quoted from Booth’s update posted on the RMT London Calling web site, entitled, “New station rosters minus the jobs”, which attempted to defend the indefensible on behalf of the RMT Executive.

It followed RMT General Secretary Bob Crow’s letter to members, where he announced there would be no further strike action in January before the job cuts came into effect and that the union remained in talks with LU management.

Booth’s article was a none too subtle attempt at dress this betrayal in a positive light. “RMT and TSSA continue to oppose these jobs cuts,” she wrote. “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.”

Tubeworkers did not strike for a review, but for their jobs. Yet Booth presents the “jobs review” which is taking place in the aftermath of the job cuts and binding arbitration as some kind of opposition on the part of the RMT.

This outcome offers no consolation to the displaced Tube workers and the rest of the workforce, who will be forced to work much harder under unsafe conditions through the imposition of the rosters minus the jobs.

Outside of London Underground management, the only other people that could derive any sense of satisfaction from the ending of the dispute on these

terms are the RMT and the Transport Salaried Staff Association bureaucracy. They have safeguarded their cosy working relations with management in imposing the downsizing of station staffing levels.

The review process devised through the union and management's collaboration at ACAS requires that stations make their cases over staffing levels individually, based upon the business requirements of LU, essentially pitting workers against one another. It is now three months since these reviews have been undertaken, reviews in which Booth will have played a direct part, and it is clear that LU has no intention of making the slightest concessions.

Booth's angry response is an attempt to put some distance between her and this debacle, but carries no conviction. She has subsequently written on the aftermath of the strike for the AWL web site, Workers Liberty, in an article entitled, "The London Underground jobs dispute in perspective".

Revealing is her admission that the RMT Executive had accepted the job cuts several months before the February 6 deadline for their implementation.

"The majority of reps and branches wanted a further, 48-hour strike before the implementation date, but TSSA and RMT's Executive decided against doing this. They had in effect, given up more than two months before the cuts were due to come in," she wrote.

Booth, who professes to stand for the rank and file, only lets this be known after the fact, and only then in order to claim that the union can still correct this mistake!

The essence of the AWL's role is summed up in the Tubeworker article, "No strikes before job cuts", published January 21. "Although our morale is drained, we must not give up on our union," it implored. "We must organise inside the union to prevent such things happening again!"

While conceding that the RMT routinely overrides mandates and sabotages any effective resistance, the AWL insists that tubeworkers have no other option than to accept its leadership. The reference to "our union" says everything about the AWL and similar groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. They constantly promote the lie that these organisations can be re-captured by the working class. Their aim is to subordinate workers to

organisations that have long-since ceased to defend the most basic interests of their members and now function as an arm of management and the corporations.

Booth and her type—the numerous ex-lefts who occupy leading positions within the union apparatus—defend "our unions" because they defend the domination of a rotten pro-capitalist bureaucracy over the working class. They defend this bureaucracy because they are part of it.

All the ex-left groups have long held up the RMT and its leader Bob Crow as a shining example of resistance, which should be replicated by all the other unions. In order to do so, they have maintained a conspiracy of silence on the RMT's sellout. But the ex-left do not simply defend the betrayals of others. They take their full part in them.

Booth is one of those behind the RMT's "Staff Our Stations" campaign, which consisted of petitions and writing postcards and letters to the London mayor and aligning the union with Liberal Democrat and Labour members of the Greater London Assembly. She actively promoted an alliance with the representatives of the corporations and financial elite on the grounds that they would provide the means to defend workers' interests.

The issues confronting tubeworkers are no different than those confronting the working class throughout Britain and internationally. They face a ruling class determined to impose the full burden of the economic crisis of capitalism on their backs, while the trade unions are either directly involved in implementing cuts or in sabotaging any effective opposition.

An effective struggle against the government and the employers demands a political and organisational rebellion against the trade union apparatus and its fake-left frontmen such as Booth.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact