

Unions call off strike on British Airways and London Underground

Tony Robson
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The calling off of strikes on London Underground and British Airways (BA) again underscores the trade unions' role in blocking any defence of jobs and conditions and preventing the emergence of a broader movement against the coalition government's austerity measures.

Within a matter of days, the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and Unite reneged on strike mandates following further negotiations with management. The unions' claim to have won concessions is a threadbare cover for their collusion with management and its cost-cutting measures.

London Underground and BA have had the longest running industrial disputes in recent years. Strikers have been confronted with a barrage of hostile media coverage and threats and intimidation from management and the law courts. But the protracted nature of these disputes is more fundamentally a product of their isolation by the trade unions. The calling off of the strikes is the culmination of this process.

The agreement recommended by Unite and its general secretary, Len McCluskey, is to be put to a postal ballot of 10,000 BA cabin crew staff. It does far more than leave all the main grievances in place that led to the dispute a year and a half ago, when the airline announced the elimination of 1,700 jobs and the introduction of inferior pay and conditions for new hires. It accepts BA's right to organise scabbing on any future dispute, agrees to strikers being penalised and promises not to defend union members from victimisation.

Voluntary crew from a "customer support programme can be deployed as part of main crew complement" in the event of a dispute causing disruption. Deductions can be made from pay in the event of industrial action,

and Unite pledges not to support any members who bring legal action against BA, including at Employment Tribunals.

Unite accepts as a fait accompli the attacks that cabin crew members have fought in the course of 22 days' strike action against. McCluskey stated, "Change is with us. There is no point rejecting change, we have to embrace it."

A BA spokesman stated, "Our agreement with Unite involves acknowledgement by the union that the cost saving structural changes we have made in cabin crew operations are permanent."

According to the *Financial Times*, the company has hired 700 new crew members who earn £17,000 a year average compared with £29,000 for existing Heathrow cabin crew. It cited a report from Deutsche Bank that shows that BA—now part of International Airlines Group—has the lowest employee costs of the major European network airlines at 22.9 percent of sales, compared with 26.8 percent in 2006.

None of the dozens of staff who have been sacked or disciplined for participating in the strike are to be reinstated. The fate of these workers is to be left in the hands of the arbitration service, ACAS. The two-year pay deal of 4 percent this year and 3.5 percent next year is below the current rate of inflation measured by the RPI and is tied to productivity strings yet to be disclosed. In short, the agreement is based on Unite functioning as an adjunct of management in policing the changes that could not be enforced through direct confrontation.

It is superfluous under such circumstances to accuse Unite of company unionism. But to underscore the pro-company outlook that permeates its leadership, one can witness the flag-waving on behalf of BA and the gushing praise heaped on its new CEO, Keith Williams,

by McCluskey. The CEO was “strong, brave and courageous”, he declared, and the agreement, “will allow us to go forward in partnership together to strengthen this great British company.”

The actions of the RMT on London Underground are in similar vein. The RMT balloted tube drivers for strike action against the sacking of two union representatives and received a 2-1 majority in favour of strike action to demand their reinstatement. Verdicts from industrial tribunals found that London Underground had unfairly dismissed them both, solely because of their trade union activities.

Having named weeks of strike days for mid-May and June, the RMT General Grades Council quickly suspended the action following further talks with management in which it was agreed to redeploy—not reinstate—one of the men while the other’s fate will be subject to further legal wrangling.

According to the statement on the agreement by the General Grades Council, a central part of the negotiations is “a review of industrial disputes.” In other words, the RMT will do a trade-off with management in return for it quelling any further industrial unrest.

The RMT has already gone some way to deliver on this. In January it called a halt to the series of one-day stoppages it had organised late last year against the elimination of 800 jobs among station staff, enabling the cuts to go through without delay. It has been reduced to holding out the prospect of at least some of the jobs being restored through a jobs review with management, again under the auspices of ACAS.

The most far-sighted sections of the British ruling class recognise that deepening the collaboration with the trade unions is indispensable in forestalling a social movement against the cuts. The *Financial Times* even called London Mayor Boris Johnson to order.

Johnson had placed himself at the head of calls for a further tightening of Britain’s already draconian anti-strike laws and denounced ministers as “lily-livered” for not doing so.

In its May 10 editorial, “Boris v strikers”—the day the RMT suspended the strike—the *FT* called Johnson’s “colourful language” and his “championing a single case” “unhelpful”:

“The government is engaged in complicated negotiations with public sector workers over

employment and pensions. These would be jeopardised were it to appear to embark on an anti-union crusade. Transport for London, which runs the Tube may not be entirely blameless in its handling of the dispute.

“While there was a crying need to amend the UK’s labour laws a quarter of a century ago, it is now more a case of fine tuning. This debate calls for cool heads. Mr Johnson should simmer down.”

The *FT* recognises the trade unions provide the most reliable mechanism for suppressing the class struggle—or to be more precise, ensuring that it continues to be fought by one side only.

The developments at BA and London Underground are an indictment of the ex-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party, who hail the unions as the fundamental organisations of the working class and the bureaucracy as the natural and unchallengeable leadership of the class struggle.

Less than two months ago, the SWP and SP declared the national demonstration organised by the TUC on March 26 as the starting point for a fight back against the coalition government. Within such fronts as the Coalition of Resistance, they promoted McCluskey and RMT leader Bob Crow as examples of left trade unions leaders who were waging the class struggle and proof that these discredited organisations could be pressured to stand up for the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* explained that the March 26 demonstration was a token gesture, behind which the TUC has continued to collaborate with the cuts and prevented any challenge to the coalition government. The fact that half a million people turned out to demonstrate was a sign of the enormous pent-up anger the trade unions have been suppressing since the government took office last May. Their only response since then has been to deepen their collaboration with the corporate and financial elite, from which their privileged position is derived.



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