

Britain's rail union calls off strikes, agrees to curtail future strikes

Paul Stuart
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On June 23, the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) called off a series of strikes on the London Underground planned for between June 27 and July 1 over the victimization and sacking of two drivers.

The strikes would have significantly affected London and coincided with national strikes by public sector workers. Calling off the strikes, the RMT issued a one-liner on its web site beneath a previous article calling on RMT members to actively support the June 30 strikes by public sector workers.

Neither driver, Arwyn Thomas and Eamonn Lynch, got their original driving jobs back, despite employment tribunals finding them to have been unfairly dismissed.

Calling off strikes and imposing company dictates is the RMT's basic function. This time, however, they have also agreed to measures that will result in a significant curtailing of the right to strike in all future cases of victimization.

According to spokesmen for London Underground Limited (LUL), the RMT has agreed that all future "individual" disputes will have to pass through, and exhaust, all options presented by the official arbitration machinery—up to and including the government arbitration service ACAS.

The Transport for London web site stated that victimization and wrongful dismissal cases "will follow the normal processes for resolving individual disputes, all of which will be exhausted up to ACAS level in advance of any ballot for industrial action being called. Any future case will be formally referred to the general secretary of the RMT and the managing director of LU for ultimate review before any such ballot."

This torturous process means that workers can be locked into discussions and appeals for years before strike action can even be considered, with the final decision made by a secret meeting between the head of the RMT, Bob Crow, and the LUL managing director, Mike Brown. According

to LUL, even prior to this deal the RMT had already agreed to a "jointly sponsored independent overview of disputes."

The deal has been hailed by the ex-left groups, notably by the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) and the Socialist Party (SP) who both have senior positions in the union. The SP described it as a "climb down," while AWL said it was "a big win." However, they are joined in this chorus by Conservative London Mayor, Boris Johnson and the right-wing *London Evening Standard*, now owned by Russian billionaire and ex-KGB agent Alexander Lebedev.

Thomas will retain his driver's salary, but will be placed in a non-driving role for two years away from his own depot. He will work under a 12-month final warning, meaning he can be instantly sacked if charged with the same offence. He has been fined £20,000, amounting to six months suspension without pay.

Lynch is also re-employed at the driver's rate, but not in his driver's job. Despite Thomas and Lynch praising the deal (Lynch is a Health and Safety rep, Thomas is a former RMT executive member), the agreement sets numerous precedents that threaten rail workers' interests.

Thomas was sacked by London Underground, who accused him of abusing a strike breaker at Morden and a supervisor at Kennington—both on the Northern Line. The RMT reported that "the CCTV evidence showed clearly that not only had Arwyn not been abusive but that he had been pursued across the station by the strike-breaker who was openly trying to provoke a confrontation. It also showed that at no time did he enter the supervisor's office at Kennington, contrary to the management claims. The only independent witness stated that there was no aggression on Arwyn's part."

Despite Crow describing this as "the clearest cut case of victimization on the grounds of union activities that you will ever see," the RMT has not explained why these

drivers should accept punishment of any kind. Nor will he ever explain why the RMT has agreed that workers who are now being systematically intimidated throughout the Underground network will no longer have the right to call on colleagues to strike to defend them. (Crow described the scale of threats getting “to the point that many of our members believe open season has been declared”.)

Thomas and Lynch were two of four union members, including three union reps, victimized during a series of strikes towards the end of 2010 against the loss of 800 booking office jobs. The RMT sabotaged and betrayed this struggle, forcing workers, who were clearly ready to fight, into a review procedure which saved just 30 jobs!

Calling off the strikes against victimization is the final act of treachery against workers efforts to resist mass job losses. It gives a green light to LUL to escalate its intimidation. Most significant of all, it is the first steps by the RMT towards creating the mechanisms needed for further curtailing the right to strike, a central demand of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government.

Caroline Pidgeon, leader of the Liberal Democrats on the London Assembly declared that now “is the perfect time for the mayor to sit down with the unions and work out a long term solution to the industrial relation problems that plague the Tube.”

LUL’s Mike Brown said the agreement would lead to a “more constructive relationship with the RMT, whereby Londoners should not be threatened with strike action relating to such individual tribunal cases in the future.”

In a House of Commons Debate on June 23, Conservative Member of Parliament Gavin Barwell responded to the RMT’s decision by asking, “Is it not about time that there was a no-strike agreement on this vital public service, preferably negotiated with the union, but failing that through government legislation?”

Theresa Villiers, the Minister of State for transport, replied, “Of course, I am well aware of the mayor’s ambitions to get a no-strike agreement, which I think would be very positive if he can negotiate it with the unions. With regard to changing strike law, the government is not rushing to any kind of confrontation with the unions...”

Crow used the threat of strikes only in order to secure the union’s position as partners of management and to convince the government that it must collaborate with the RMT if it wants to push through billions in transport cuts, rather than take up Johnson’s more confrontational approach. In May, Crow urged Johnson to climb out of his “bunker” and “help return relations to a positive

footing.” He added in a comment in the *Evening Standard* that “criticism of the Mayor’s inaction extends to the Cabinet, and not just to Lib-Dems. Even a Tory minister has been moved to apologise for the Mayor’s behaviour, too.”

The fake left on the RMT executive, in the person of Janine Booth of AWL, has taken up the defence of this corporatist agreement.

The AWL’s web site, on June 24, dismissed the punishment of Lynch and Thomas as a “few strings” that they could live with. It acknowledged that the RMT had made a deal with LUL that in future that they would have to “exhaust the disciplinary procedure before balloting for strikes on individual cases,” but justified this by insisting that “our agreements with management already say we should exhaust the procedures first.”

On June 29, the AWL’s Janine Booth, who is the London Transport region representative on the RMT Executive, called the agreement “a very important win... The outcome is not 100% perfect, but in the circumstances, it is a big victory.”

Thomas, interviewed by Sarah Sachs-Eldridge, editor of *The Socialist*, provided a revealing glimpse into the general cynicism that pervades all ranks of the union bureaucracy and the fake lefts that populate them. “We timed the strike so that the dates would incorporate 30 June,” he said, the date set for strikes by four public sector unions that are led by the ex-left groups. “I think the fact that we would have gone on strike then enormously strengthened our hand. I’d like to see this victory as the first victory of the 30 June movement.”

This is how Thomas dares to describe a rotten agreement serving to prevent rail workers from joining teachers and civil servants in joint action, published in a newspaper that makes the demand for the unions to organise a token one day general strike its mantra.



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