

Mass job losses and privatisation on London Underground

Daniel O'Flynn
19 December 2011

A London Underground (LUL) management document, *Operational Strategy Discussion Paper* (OSDP), has been leaked to the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT).

Involved is a historic assault on jobs and working conditions. It is aimed at facilitating widespread privatisation of service and removing the ability of workers to oppose and disrupt the criminal operations of the financial and political elite.

Efforts by LUL management to downplay the OSDP as a routine document are belied by its main strategic statement that “the status quo is not an option.” It demands a “cultural” shift and a confrontation with a “mindset centered around inflexible operational processes and procedures.”

Since gaining office, Conservative mayor Boris Johnson and the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition have demanded an offensive against LUL workers. London's *Evening Standard* ran a campaign hailing the benefit of cuts and “driverless” trains.

The OSDP's financial target is to save £1.8 billion, as part of the £5 billion in cuts to the London Transport budget pushed through by Johnson as part of the government's £100 billion austerity drive.

Initial estimates are of job losses up to 1,500, including 770 supervisors and managers, the closure of all 270 booking offices and the introduction of driverless trains, in preparation for widespread privatisation of the network.

Every section of workers will be affected.

- LUL is preparing by 2016 to close all existing ticket offices, to be replaced by 30 privatised Travel Information Centres with staff trained as “non-operational travel information specialists”: in other words, workers untrained in safety management in the station or track environment and paid much less.

- The OSDP advocates “Passenger Operated Machines (POM) upgrades and ‘Wave and Pay’ by bank card so that traditional ticket offices are no longer required,” which means fares will be taken directly from passengers' bank accounts. The relatively new Oyster Card system was initiated to prepare the infrastructure for these changes.

- The OSDP demands a vast increase in productivity for those workers that remain. Workloads for station supervisors and managers will double overnight. Station assistants will be significantly reduced, and those that remain will be forced to cover vacant posts by “removing restrictions on overtime,” in what is called “Overtime Substitution.” The OSDP estimates that a freeze on recruitment, combined with enforced overtime, will produce a 26 percent reduction in hourly costs.

- A major assault on drivers' jobs and wages is planned. By 2018, the OSDP claims that LUL, with the introduction of new technology, could operate 80 percent of its services without drivers, to be replaced by “train attendants.” The OSDP states, “The introduction will provide opportunities to fundamentally change the role of a train operator. Rolling stock is unlikely to be manufactured with a separate cab, shifting the role of on-board staff to become fully customer-facing.... Going further forward it seems likely that the new generation of trains will prepare themselves for service—even to the extent of arriving from depots unaided perhaps even eventually operating in certain areas without staff on board.”

LUL has prepared for some time the introduction of driverless trains. A number of key lines have the technology in place, and new technology is currently being tested out on the Jubilee Line, widely seen as a precursor to driverless systems. Driverless trains

operate on the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) serving the banking and financial district in East London. It is already running a driverless system of “train captains,” with the collaboration of the RMT. The train captain does everything on board, including driving to a safe location in case of a system failure, on wages significantly lower than LUL drivers.

Existing budget cuts are already having a huge impact on basic safety procedures, but the OSDP involves the removal of highly trained and motivated staff trained in basic safety procedures involving train and station evacuations. This comes on top of major changes to standard safety checks on trains, tracks, signals and escalators.

Prior to the leaking of the OSDP, management had engaged in a sustained campaign of intimidation of workers throughout the network, which the RMT described as “rife”. But rejecting any collective struggle, apart from a number of high-profile cases, workers have been left by the RMT to fight the issues out on an individual basis. This gave LUL management a green light to intimidate opposition at will, as it drew up behind the scenes its OSDP proposals.

The OSDP comes in the wake of the RMT’s sabotage and betrayal of four one-day strikes at the end of 2010 against 800 ticket office job losses. The plan to cut these jobs was also leaked in a document obtained by the RMT. In the face of a determined stance by workers, the RMT called off the strikes based on a phony moratorium on job losses that only paved the way for worse attacks.

The RMT’s response to the OSDP proposals, described as a “blueprint for jobs and safety carnage,” was summed up by General Secretary Bob Crow, who will launch a campaign with the other trade unions to pressure LUL management and the mayor’s office to consign the OSDP to the “dustbin”.

As with all other attacks launched by Transport for London, LUL and Johnson and his predecessor, Labour’s Ken Livingstone, the RMT, the drivers’ union ASLEF and the management/administration union TSSA have proven time and again to be the organisers of defeats. Resistance to the OSDP proposals cannot proceed under their leadership, but requires the formation of new, fighting democratic organisations of the rank and file, armed with a socialist programme and leadership.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact