

London Underground uses Hong Kong and Singapore metros as benchmark

A London Transport worker
23 February 2012

In response to the article, “Mass job losses and privatisation on London Underground”, a London transport worker forwarded the World Socialist Web Site his assessment of the ultimate targets of the new “Operational Strategy Discussion Paper”.

London Underground (LUL) management and the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition are preparing an all-out assault on London Underground workers, as they look to exploit the economic crisis to drive up productivity and slash labour costs across the whole network.

LUL’s new “Operational Strategy Discussion Paper” is a blueprint for ripping up working conditions, eliminating thousands of jobs, closing all ticket offices (800 ticket office staff jobs went in 2010) and privatising the network.

The company sees the privately run, highly automated Hong Kong Metro (HKMTR) and Singapore Metro (SMTR) as its benchmarks. They are two of the most profitable metro systems in the world. In 2010, according to the Hong Kong Sustainability Report, HKMTR made 800,000 Hong Kong dollars (US\$100,000) in profits for each employee. SMTR, according to its own Sustainability Report, currently takes in US\$4 for every dollar spent in staff costs.

Both companies are run purely for profit and have the highest fares in the world relative to the average wage of their passengers. HKMTR already owns 50 percent of the London Overground network and the operations of the Stockholm Metro.

Higher profits on HKMTR and SMTR are instructive. Workers earn between US\$140 and US\$500 a month, have a six-day working week, holiday entitlement of just five days a year after one year in work, no pensions or company life insurance, or sick pay, and can be fired at will. There is minimal welfare provision in case of severe illness or unemployment.

Key figures promoting the changes on London Underground are Emeritus Professor Tony M. Ridley of Imperial College, London, and his colleague Richard Anderson. Ridley is a former LUL chairman and chief executive and served for eight years on the board of London Transport. He was the first director of the HKMTR in the 1970s.

In 2006, Ridley and Anderson addressed the UK parliament calling for London Underground to restructure its equipment and workforce up to HKMTR and SMRT levels. Both men have been heavily involved in the benchmarking reports produced by the international Community of Metros group of companies (CoMET) to advise transport companies on best practice and profitability.

The 2011-2018 cost-cutting measures on the London Underground are in line with the decisions taken at a February 2011 meeting involving CoMET and the Nova groups of international metro managements. Chaired by Anderson, it decided to pursue a number of options, including the reduction of unit costs, putting pressure on productivity and the terms and conditions of the existing workforce, hiding public expenditure and fettering freedom of future politicians.

The exploitative working regimes used for delivering

This strategy is in line with that described by London

Underground managing director Richard Parry at a meeting held in London in June 2011. He noted that such a strategy would “involve the alteration of established and heavily negotiated working practices” and that “We acknowledge that it is unlikely that such a major change will be achieved without the full support of Government and the Mayor of London”.

One area of staffing reduction is through the use of driverless trains across the network. A working model already exists in the automated Docklands Light Railway that has become essential to the operation of the City of London’s financial district. In preparation for the new proposals, a driverless track was built near East Finchley station in North London to test new automated systems on the Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly lines.

In September 2011, two driverless trains collided on Shanghai’s Metro Line 10. More than 284 injured passengers had to be ferried to six hospitals by 62 ambulances. Line 10 operates with the same signalling system as parts of the London Underground. A Metro engineer told the Chinese daily *Epoch Times*, “This newly built subway line has been put into operation without meeting the necessary technical specifications. This is purely profit driven”.

The Shanghai accident merited no mention in the 2011 CoMET/Nova newsletter.

As management imposes job losses through automation, it is reliant on the unions to implement the plan. LUL unions Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA) have collaborated with job cuts, attacks on working conditions and privatisation, which the *World Socialist Web Site* has catalogued at every stage.

Under capitalism, technology in transport is used exclusively to maximise profits at the expense of workers and passengers. To enable a progressive use of such new technologies requires a different social organisation.

Transport workers and passengers must take decisions through rank-and-file committees on how to apply new technologies to improve their livelihoods and their quality of life. This requires the full democratic control of transport and other services by the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact