

London Underground to press ahead with driverless trains

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In December, Transport for London (TfL) announced its new business plan. This was, as London Mayor Boris Johnson acknowledged at the launch, an appeal to the government for new funding in part in return for an automation programme that will eliminate jobs, in line with TfL's 2011 "Operational Strategy Discussion Paper" (OSDP).

Traveller safety is low on the list of priorities.

In the business plan, for example, TfL pledged £3.9 billion spending on London's roads over the next decade. This came only days after it emerged that in 2011 TfL had allowed Hammersmith Flyover to remain open to traffic for four weeks after a report revealed the possibility the bridge might collapse. Hammersmith Flyover is used by around 90,000 vehicles a day.

The business plan also reaffirmed TfL's commitment to driverless Tube trains despite accidents and near tragedies on the lines being automated. Two months ago London evening paper the *Standard* reported that London Underground (LU) had cancelled scheduled tests of driverless trains on the Jubilee Line. The paper quoted Mike Brown, LU managing director, who insisted there were "no plans to test driverless trains on any part of the network".

This was hardly plausible. The Victoria, Jubilee, Central and Northern lines already run with semi-automatic operation, and Johnson has repeatedly expressed support for driverless trains. The OSDP outlined a plan for the introduction of driverless trains by 2020.

Other Conservatives on the Greater London Authority objected to Brown's conciliatory comment, demanding that this commitment be restated publicly. Richard Tracey, GLA Tory group transport spokesman, said, "Driverless trains are a safer, more efficient, faster alternative to today's operation of the Underground."

He thought driverless trains "will play an integral part in boosting the Tube's capacity". The business plan has reaffirmed this view, saying that "automatically controlled" trains will be introduced in the 2020s "to provide the opportunity to achieve increased capacity".

Accidents reported from the lines already automated point to the potential catastrophe ahead. Last March a five-year-old boy was pulled away from a Jubilee Line train at Finchley Road station after falling between the train and the platform. The driver saw the boy's hands as he attempted to climb back onto the platform, and stopped the train in time to pull him to safety.

The Jubilee Line has long been a test line for LU. In 2010 Howard Collins, operations director of LU, gave a presentation to the annual MetroRail gathering of international metro managers on managing risk while integrating new technology into some of the oldest lines in the world. He focused on "the success of new signalling tests on the Jubilee Line".

For LU this is about maximising profits. At this year's MetroRail gathering Brown and Collins participated in a panel named: "Doing more with less: increasing revenue while controlling costs".

The Jubilee Line operates the Seltrack-Alsthom automated train system. Seltrack is a means of detecting a metallic object moving along an electric circuit using electromagnetic signals. Pioneered on the Montreal metro, it has been used in the railway industry since the 1970s. The driverless Docklands Light Railway uses this technology. The system comprises automated driverless trains, a control room and CCTV, all monitored by computers and routers along a network of stations, track and trains. All navigating signals are electromagnetic, rather than the traditional visual light signals. Workers and passengers are monitored visually by CCTV at stations and on board

trains. Managers with high clearance can listen in to passengers' and workers' conversations.

In September 2011, two driverless trains collided on Shanghai's Metro Line 10, which uses the Seltrack-Alsthom system. More than 284 passengers were injured. No corporate managers were prosecuted for the crash, but three front line staff were dismissed, two of them the attendants on the crashed trains.

LU is jointly testing the new Bombardier driverless train system CITY FLO 650 together with the Madrid Metro. CITY FLO 650, which is already in operation in China, is due to be introduced in London in 2018 on the Circle, Hammersmith & City, Metropolitan, and District Lines.

The Community of Metros (CoMET) group regularly exchange best practice methods for maximising profits. The CoMET benchmarks are the two most automated and profit-driven metros in the world, the Hong Kong Metro and the Singapore Metro. Richard Anderson of RTSC Imperial College in February 2011 chaired a meeting on cost-cutting in world metros that 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".

Metro managements internationally have relied on the trade unions for assistance in this project. In 2011, it was revealed that the management of the Paris Metro, RATP, had subsidised the UNSA and CGT unions to the tune of €50 million (US\$65 million) each year in order "to keep the social peace". During that time driverless trains were introduced.

As part of "managing risks", Alsthom trains were introduced to London's Northern Line in 1995. This, on a system with outdated 1920s visual signalling, led to safety incidents involving trains rolling backwards and derailments. Since 1978 the District Line has operated the only underground trains in the world where speedometers and air gauges are not lit. The control centre of both the Piccadilly and District Lines above Earl's Court Station is an asbestos-hazard building where signal operators and service controllers are forced to work. Trade union health and safety representatives have deemed it a safe building, although the premises are lined with warning stickers about asbestos on the walls and ceilings.

Trade unions and the Trades Union Congress are stakeholders in TfL. Union officials sit alongside senior managers on the boards of subsidiary companies and charities administering the company's pension and benevolent funds. As stakeholders both unions and management are bound by confidentiality agreements.

TfL are working with the unions as key partners in delivering the reductions demanded by the OSDP, looking for them to "agree to minimum numbers" of workers on stations in order to save "£28m per annum by 2018" with the cost per passenger journey being reduced from 30p to 25p.

They also look to the unions for support in tearing up existing working conditions. The OSDP proposes to "reduce overall level of cover in line with station model, [and] remove restrictions on voluntary overtime".

Last summer the drivers' union ASLEF, the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and the white-collar union TSSA all agreed to temporarily rip up existing agreements on the Tube during the Olympics. The working day was extended to nine and a half hours and passenger hours were extended from 4:30 a.m. to 3:30 a.m. the following morning. Two years ago the unions mounted no fight against LUL's attempt to axe 800 jobs.

The RMT boasted in November that it "reaffirms [its] determination to resist automation as an attack on jobs", but its major concern in the discussions with management was to maintain its place in the "machinery of negotiations".



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