

A reply to a defender of the UK's RMT rail union

11 February 2013

The following e-mail was sent in response to the January 5 article, "London Underground to press ahead with driverless trains." It is followed by a reply.

I'm an RMT member who works for London Underground. I read this article with interest until I reached the last paragraph saying "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'."

The RMT called 4 days of industrial action over job losses. It wasn't successful, but action was called and we (at least) demonstrated that such actions would be allowed easily.

To say the RMT agreed to extended hours over the Olympics is also untrue. This was an ASLEF agreement (made bizarrely a long time before the Olympics) and something the RMT didn't agree to.

I would also like to ask where you get the idea that "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'."

RMT's major concern is always to protect jobs.

When you say "Union officials sit alongside senior managers on the boards of subsidiary companies and charities administering the company's pension and benevolent funds" what are you implying? Would it be better to ignore the process entirely and leave it to management? I'm just asking as I don't understand why a socialist organisation would make this sort of attack on the RMT—giving inaccurate detail and unsourced mismatched quotes.

Thanks.

Peter North

Dear Mr. North,

It was ASLEF, as you say, that agreed to the extension of their drivers' working day to nine-and-a-half hours. We are happy to clarify this because that deal took place, as we stated, within an extension of passenger hours agreed on by all the London Underground unions.

All unions on the Tube accepted and accommodated the basic premise of further flexibility during the Olympic Games. These deals were a way of ensuring that no industrial struggles broke out during the Olympics in order to showcase British capitalism, as the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government imposed an unprecedented militarisation of working class districts of East London.

When the RMT signed its Olympic recognition deal last May, Transport for London (TfL) welcomed this as meaning "LU is ready to meet the higher demand that the network will face during the Games."

As early as 2007, the TUC, discussing the *Unions2012* group set up to negotiate with the Olympics Delivery Authority (ODA), commented, "Achieving a fair and transparent balance between directly employed workers contract and sub-contract labour and volunteers is a key issue for trade unions. It will require discussion with stakeholders on the various roles and responsibilities involved, work patterns and associated health and safety, refreshment and other facilities."

The RMT led no opposition to the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The deal agreed to at the conciliation service Acas by the RMT, ASLEF, Unite and the TSSA was that LU would "attempt to staff all relevant Olympic duties on a voluntary basis. In the unlikely event that any of these duties remain uncovered, **level 1 committees**, where they operate, or their equivalent (but where not, **functional councils**) will as a matter of urgency, address these issues in order to resolve them satisfactorily." This flexibility was linked to productivity deals. On the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), for example, the deal for train captains was tied to an attendance bonus and a guaranteed minimum overtime payment of five hours a week. The RMT's Olympic recognition deal with LU described any bonuses as "subject to attendance, customer satisfaction scores and working flexibly for defined periods."

The Olympic deal for Network Rail maintenance workers (agreed before the ASLEF deal described here) included

automatic referral of Olympic disputes to Acas. The RMT declared it did not constitute a no-strike deal because it “recognise[d] the continuing right to withdraw labour.” RMT members thus had the right to strike, but no right to exercise that right!

The RMT has waged no political struggle against ASLEF’s strikebreaking operations, combining rhetoric against the union with cooperation with it inside the TUC. In 2010, ASLEF was able to vote for the TUC conference motion, declaring solidarity with striking Tube workers even as they broke the strike.

Your claim that the RMT’s “major concern is always to protect jobs” is false. For years its “no compulsory redundancy” policy has been used to impose thousands of “voluntary redundancies” across the rail network. “Voluntary” redundancy is an expression that workers have no confidence the unions will protect their livelihoods.

You write that the four days’ industrial action in 2010 over job losses “wasn’t successful.” The RMT sabotaged the fight against job losses. The RMT had offered to call off the strike in November 2010. They scaled back action as the deadline for the imposition of job losses approached. A Christmas overtime ban was called off on the grounds of a phony review procedure. LU then imposed the job losses.

This was not a first. In 2009, Bob Crow wrote in the *Guardian* that “bosses are threatening to tear up an agreement aimed at safeguarding jobs, and have refused to rule out compulsory redundancies. Up to 4,000 jobs are at risk as part of a multi-billion pound cuts package that can be traced directly back to the collapse of Metronet and the failure of the PPP.”

Crow’s effort to extract the RMT from responsibility for this situation will not wash. The RMT sabotaged the fight against the last Labour government’s LU privatisation programme. Three votes for strike action against PPP proposals in 2001 were betrayed. The RMT refused to make opposing privatisation its explicit aim, and claimed its deal with LU secured the jobs and conditions of Tube workers.

Using the pretext of no compulsory redundancies, the RMT disarmed workers against privatisation and the transfer of jobs to different private sector companies, driving a wedge between maintenance workers on the station and train operations side. The result was that two new private companies were established in 2003. The 6,000 jobs threatened with transfer to the private sector were not protected, but committed the RMT to “cooperat[ing] with the introduction of organisational change and new working arrangements.”

In 2007, one of the companies, Metronet, collapsed with debts of £2 billion. TfL was forced to take over. The RMT claimed in 2009 to have secured undertakings to protect jobs, but LU simply reduced staffing levels by not covering vacancies. Up to a third of all jobs on the network may have been left vacant.

The consequences of this were at the heart of the 2010

struggle against the loss of 800 mainly ticket office jobs. The RMT did not defend these jobs.

In each betrayal, the union’s sole concern is to demoralise and defeat opposition and preserve a niche within the industrial relations apparatus. This was made clear in the statement “RMT Reaffirms Determination to Resist Automation as an Attack on Jobs” (November 16, 2012). It includes provisions for flexibility in meeting management both inside and outside the machinery of negotiation.

The presence of union officials on the boards of the subsidiary companies and benevolent funds must be seen in this context. You present the participation of union officials as a safeguard for workers’ pension investments. In fact, they represent a considerable threat to pension security, as their main advisors are the banks and financial institutions, including Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs, who caused the 2008 economic crash and are preparing a new more devastating one.

The RMT is now engaged in efforts (alongside ASLEF) to force a union position on the national network’s Rail Delivery Group (RDG). The RDG is run by CEOs of the private rail corporations. The RMT has correctly described it as the mechanism for imposing the McNulty recommendations—20,000 job cuts, productivity and privatisation. Yet it threatened industrial action not to confront the RDG, but for inclusion in it! Since receiving assurances on consultation, the campaign against McNulty has been dropped.

Contrary to the tone of your letter, you are not simply a rank-and-file worker, but an RMT rep at Stratford. You edit *London Calling*, the web site of the RMT’s London Transport Regional Council. This web site, posturing as a voice of the rank and file, apologises for every act of treachery by the RMT executive. It is also a stepping-stone onto the union executive, where big money of course awaits.

The RMT’s integration into corporate structures and hostility to the workers is exactly the same as all other trade unions, despite the best efforts of the pseudo-left and Stalinists, who dominate it, to portray it as bucking the trend. For transport workers to take forward the struggle to protect jobs wages and working conditions requires formation of action committees independent of these old, outmoded and bankrupt company unions and a turn to the struggle for socialism.

Paul Bond



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