

London Underground prepares mass closure of ticket offices

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Recent disclosures have again confirmed London Underground management is planning to close all its 268 ticket offices over the next two years. Around 2,000 jobs are expected to be lost during that period, with job losses across the rail and underground network rising to 6,000 by 2020. The job losses are part of Transport for London (TfL) and London Conservative mayor Boris Johnson's £7.6 billion cuts programme to the London transport budget.

The details were contained in a leaked document issued by TfL, the parent company of London Underground (LUL). The document, *Every Journey Matters*, is LUL management's response to the announcement in June of a cut of £220 million in government funding. A BBC report says the document lists "every Tube station in the capital." Under a "heading that asks if a ticket office is staying open, [the document] states 'no'."

To this end, LUL is mobilising selected members of staff, offering them six months' paid leave to operate freely across the network, going into ticket offices and encouraging workers to support the cuts. Clerical trade union the Transport Staff and Salaried Association (TSSA) has described this as a "ludicrous gimmick" and accused LUL management of wasting money, but neither it nor other unions have sought to mobilise workers against the impending layoffs.

The transport unions are instead using the document as a way of resuscitating the fortunes of the deeply discredited Labour Party. Manuel Cortes, TSSA general secretary, issued a statement with Labour's London minister, Sadiq Khan, attacking Johnson for "reneging on his 2008 election promise to retain a manned ticket office at every Tube station."

Cortes urged the Conservative mayor not to bypass procedures on job cutting agreed on by management

with the unions: "We have a deal with Transport for London which clearly rules out compulsory redundancies. If [Johnson] tears that up all bets are off."

The Rail Maritime Transport Workers union (RMT) represents the majority of ticket office staff. RMT general secretary Bob Crow said that "government cuts of 12.5 percent to TfL budgets would result in thousands of job losses and now the numbers are being confirmed we are prepared to ballot across the capital for strike action in defence of jobs and services."

There is widespread opposition to the job cuts amongst TfL workers. London Overground conductors are facing the elimination of their grade as the company seeks to impose driver-only operation. They voted overwhelmingly for strike action, and held their first 48-hour strike last weekend.

There is also opposition among passengers. According to a survey conducted in July by the passenger group London Travel, there is "overwhelming support for ticket offices in all staffed stations remaining open when services are running."

All of the transport unions—TSSA, RMT and the drivers' union ASLEF—have a history of spouting opposition to attacks on the workforce whilst collaborating behind the scenes to implement those very attacks. In 2011, the RMT closed down a series of powerful strikes, helping management to impose 800 jobs cuts to stations and ticket offices across the Tube.

Also, despite the air of revelation, these proposals are not new. They were reported in the 2011 "Operational Strategy Discussion Paper" (OSDP), the contents of which were widely distributed in union publications at the time. The OSDP covered driverless trains and the closure of all ticket offices, replacing them with information centres at the busiest stations and manned

by contract workers.

For almost two years, the trade unions have opposed any coordinated offensive against these measures. Instead, TfL is 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.”

The trade unions’ campaign against TfL job losses is a cynical political manoeuvre directed at resurrecting Labour. During recent protests and marches against the closure and sale of 12 fire stations, the London Fire Brigades Union (FBU) pushed Labour Party officials and branch banners to the front of their events. This token opposition created the breathing space needed for Johnson to unilaterally impose his fire station closure programme.

In June, the TSSA held a conference on “Winning the General Election for Transport.” Among the speakers was Arnie Graf, a former adviser to Barack Obama who has been advising Labour on approaches to “grassroots and community organising.” According to the TSSA’s report of the event, Labour MP Jon Cruddas spoke about “how adopting community organising can transform the character of the trade union movement and Labour Party so that we are much more closely engaged with the concerns of the community.”

Manuel Cortes then spoke about ending “the madness of privatisation” by appealing to Labour to “put itself firmly on the side of ordinary working people.” This is the party that implemented privatisation programmes in office. While the TSSA speaks of not being “taken for granted by Labour,” the union has a firm commitment to supporting Labour candidates.

The ASLEF, similarly, is looking to shore up the Labour Party. It was a signatory to the all-union “Action For Rail” campaign launched last May in response to cuts proposed from the McNulty <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/03/rmtu-m20.html> recommendations. Maria Eagle, Labour shadow transport minister, spoke at its parliamentary launch. The union’s August journal features an article by former GMB union political officer Glenis Willmott, now Member of the European Parliament for the East Midlands. Willmott explains “why the Labour Party needs more ASLEF activists standing for political office” and sets out the support available.

The RMT has posed as being critical of Labour. Bob Crow has repeatedly talked of building “an alternative party of labour.” The models he has championed have been right-wing outfits like the No2EU campaign, which sought to direct opposition to the bankers’ European Union into nationalist appeals for British Jobs for British workers.

Even as he has boasted of the RMT’s independence since its expulsion from the Labour Party in 2004, Crow has made clear it will function as adjuncts of Labour. Last year, the RMT-funded Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) decided not to run a candidate in the London mayoral elections against Labour’s Ken Livingstone. Crow said he had “never been apart” from Livingstone, and offered his campaign the RMT’s financial support. “We have differences like I have with my brother and sister but overall, Ken’s a good bloke.”

Crow had nothing to say of Livingstone’s repeated condemnation of strikes by LUL workers and others in defence of jobs and conditions. He kept quiet on the role he and the RMT played in colluding with Livingstone pushing through the privatisation of the Tube. The Labour Party vastly extended public subsidies to private corporations via numerous Public Private Partnerships schemes. The venture on the Tube, Metronet, ended with the public having to bail out the whole failed scheme when it went into administration.

The result of the unions’ collusion in the privatisation process was a division of workers by Tube line. Increasingly, disputes arising are being balloted and conducted on a line-by-line basis and not in a unified response by the whole workforce. During the previous round of job losses, the RMT accepted LUL’s criteria for conducting a review on a station-by-station and line-by-line basis.



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