

UK rail unions deepen collaboration in government transport cuts

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In December, London Overground Rail Operations Limited (LOROL) will eliminate 130 safety-critical conductors' (Guards) posts and impose driver-only operation (DOO) trains throughout the network.

Last summer, LOROL invoked a clause in its franchise agreement with Transport for London (TfL) providing six months' notice to transform LOROL into an entirely driver-only operation. LOROL received a safety validation certificate this month.

London Overground carries around 100,000 passengers a day and is controlled by TfL, which leases the running of the service to a global consortium of Hong Kong metro company MTR and the German state railway company Deutsche Bahn. The Conservative/Liberal Democratic government has imposed budget cuts of 12.5 percent on TfL.

Most LOROL conductors are represented by the Rail Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT). The unions' general secretary, Stalinist Bob Crow, declared the job cuts were only a "taste of what's to come" and no part of the transport system would "remain unscathed," after which the RMT deployed its highly polished mechanism of sabotage and betrayal used to suppress hundreds of strikes since the privatisation of the rail industry in 1997.

When attacks are announced, RMT officials feign shock, then declare an all-out struggle is required, usually securing a massive yes in a ballot for strike action.

LOROL conductors voted 96 percent in favour of strike action and held a 48-hour strike.

RMT officials allow such strikes as a means of having workers let off steam, before calling off the strike, based on an alleged "improved" offer. They then impose the main demands the transport corporations originally wanted, in this case closing down opposition

to the elimination of an entire safety-critical grade.

When LOROL first announced its plans, Crow said the RMT would place the defence of conductors at the centre of a campaign against TfL budget cuts.

Conductors confronted the combined weight of two global transport companies and a cross-party political alliance. In response, the RMT deliberately chose to ballot only conductors even though all other workers in LOROL would be directly affected in the form of productivity increases. This was designed to increase conductors' sense of isolation. It also led to other LOROL workers, members of the same union, being forced to cross picket lines and work during the conductors' strike. The RMT and drivers' union ASLEF provided LOROL management with a foundation for a determined strikebreaking operation.

Throughout this period, there have been a series of other disputes amongst transport workers that the RMT has deliberately kept apart. They have involved agency workers dismissed by LOROL, LOROL Travel Safe Officers, Serco bike workers, and London Underground Limited (LUL) drivers on different LUL lines, while LUL booking office staff confront the closure of all LUL ticket offices. All have been involved in a series of determined strikes and protests. These disputes have not been coordinated or unified.

After closing down all other options, the RMT agreed and continued to promote a "voluntary" redundancy package used by LOROL and the RMT to weaken opposition to the cuts. The RMT protested when, according to the union, LOROL tried to include in the package a no-strike deal, describing its removal as a gain for workers. Those workers who have taken redundancy will confirm there is nothing "voluntary" about it, and it is an indictment of the RMT's treachery.

Despite widespread support from LOROL drivers, who will bear the burden of operating trains on their own, all solidarity action was choked off by both unions. Indeed, in the years prior to the announcement of conductor job cuts, the RMT had been collaborating with LOROL in restructuring jobs and grades, including the conductors, that prepared the groundwork for the elimination of the conductor grade altogether.

TfL is now bidding to take over other overground rail franchises into London. It is using LOROL as its blueprint, basing its plans on the brutally exploited and virtually de-staffed Hong Kong Metro.

Crow's much-vaunted "fiercest possible resistance" amounted to an appeal to the architects of the attack on conductors, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government, the Conservative London mayor Boris Johnson and TfL management, to refuse to issue LOROL a safety certificate for driver-only operation.

On October 14, Crow called off the strikes after LOROL agreed there will be "no compulsory redundancies". Accepting the elimination of the conductor grade, Crow added that the salaries of conductor members "will be protected". LOROL's overall plan to introduce driver-only operated trains will not be opposed by the RMT, with Crow stating, "I can confirm that the issue of the safety validation is due to be finalised in mid November and LOROL will go DOO on its North and West London lines by no later than the 8th December 2013."

DOO is presented as inevitable, and the RMT has confronted workers with two options—redundancy or transfer out of the grade. The RMT's collaboration in eliminating the conductor grade exposes once more the fraud of the RMT and the Trades Union Congress's campaign against the recommendations of Sir Roy McNulty commissioned by the last Labour government and adopted by the Conservative-led coalition.

McNulty proposed a massive restructuring of Britain's rail network, cuts of up to £3.5 billion per year, achieved through tens of thousands of jobs cuts and unending productivity increases. McNulty declared that the "default" position for the operation of all trains is DOO, threatening thousands of jobs. The RMT reported that as part of new bidding for rail franchises the Department for Transport is insisting that any bids must contain consultation on imposing driver-only operation.

Transport workers confront a basic truth that to confront this assault by MTR and Deutsche Bahn, global corporations that can draw on vast resources and have the total support of the British government, they must break from the straitjacket of the RMT and form new organisations of class struggle based on a socialist strategy.



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