

Britain: Rail unions betray London Overground conductors

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In December rail unions facilitated the elimination of 130 safety-critical conductor jobs on London Overground Rail Operations Limited (LOROL). The biggest union involved, the Rail Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT), is now threatening a dispute over agreements made, in an attempt to justify that betrayal to its members.

It poses a clear warning of what the RMT will do in the face of the other threatened job losses, like the impending axing of 1,000 ticket office jobs on London Underground.

The RMT are threatening a dispute over LOROL's non-compliance with an agreement over payments made to staff forced out of their grade by the agreed job losses. In a circular last month the union noted that LOROL were proposing "to buy out of the remaining years of the 2012 pay award in the form of an adjusted one-off payment."

This buy-out of the remaining elements of the four-year deal reduced the pay award to a 5 percent increase over three years in place of the deal's 7.5 percent increase. It left former conductors out of pocket by up to 16 hours for what is known as the Black Ink Sundays [a rostered Sunday].

Workers rejected the intended buy-out.

The RMT complained feebly, "It is also worth mentioning that the multi-year agreement was signed in good faith by both the company and this union and it is abhorrent that management wish to revisit the agreement with an inferior offer."

The union's protest was that management should uphold the agreements put in place to stifle opposition to the job cuts.

Last summer LOROL invoked a clause in its franchise agreement with Transport for London and gave six months' notice of implementing entirely

driver-only operation. LOROL received its safety validation certificate in early December. London Overground carries around 100,000 passengers a day. It 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 Democrat coalition has imposed budget cuts of 12.5 percent on TfL.

In a circular dated December 5, RMT General Secretary Bob Crow explained the extent of the union's collusion with TfL in securing the trouble-free destruction of a safety critical grade. Confirming that London Overground were continuing to force through implementation of driver-only operation (DOO), he wrote, "Conductors who have opted for voluntary severance will be released in early December. The migration into the Station Grades of approximately 40 former Conductors is now being arranged and I can confirm that a Joint Working Party of former Conductors and the Functional Station Representatives has been set up to discuss rostering issues and to combine all existing LOROL staff agreements/arrangements into a single handbook. This will assist members transferring from the Conductor Grade whilst protecting existing Station Grade members."

Crow noted discussion with the company over the 2012 pay award, and LOROL's proposed buy-out given the elimination of the conductor grade.

Even before this circular Crow had acknowledged that the RMT never had any intention of fighting to defend jobs. In October the union called off strike action by the conductors on the grounds that LOROL had agreed to "no compulsory redundancies." Crow wrote, "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.”

Last November, at TXM Plant Doncaster, a union circular from Bob Crow graphically illustrated how the technique of betrayal used to eliminate London Overground conductors’ jobs is being used throughout the country. The circular stated that TXM management “intended to transfer the work from its Doncaster depot to Gainsborough” and “wished to make a number of staff from Doncaster redundant as a result of this transfer, which was not the stated intention at the start of the process.”

The company insisted that “all members of staff employed at Doncaster” would be offered voluntary redundancy.

The circular continued, “The company also announced that the alleged high cost of the redundancy programme meant that it would make the payments over a three-month period and not as a one-off lump sum.”

The RMT concluded that the General Grades Committee, having noted that relocation “has taken place, with jobs having been cut and new contracts imposed”, would “obtain legal advice to ascertain whether the employer has fulfilled its legal obligations.”

LOROL conductors had voted overwhelmingly for strike action and forced the union to hold a 48-hour strike, but they could not defeat global transport companies, TfL and all the major political parties on their own. The unions isolated conductors from other transport workers including LOROL drivers, and station, security and revenue staff who were engaged in a series of disputes.

The RMT and the train drivers’ union ASLEF refused to bring these workers out in support. Instead they were forced to cross picket lines. Having isolated the conductors, the RMT left them no option but to take what they called “voluntary” redundancy or forcibly transfer out of the grade.

The elimination of the LOROL conductors, forced through by the RMT, has given a green light to all the private rail franchises to accelerate the elimination of the conductor grade altogether, involving more than 4,000 jobs. Already other private rail franchises running trains into London are speeding up their plans

to impose driver-only operations. The RMT are deploying the same treacherous strategy against the next group of conductors as they did at LOROL.

Only days before the LOROL conductors’ posts were eliminated, the RMT and ASLEF established a joint campaign against driver-only operation. RMT reported that it would “convene a meeting with ASLEF to discuss a joint approach to opposing Driver Only Operation.”

It will in reality operate as a front for the suppression of any struggle by rail workers, at a time when London Underground workers are balloting for industrial action against the closure of all 265 booking offices with the loss of 1,000 jobs.



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