

London Underground workers to strike against ticket office closures

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Members of the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT) have voted overwhelmingly to strike against the planned closure of all 260 ticket offices on the London Underground network, with the loss of 1,000 jobs.

Budget cuts of 12.5 percent have been imposed on Transport for London (TfL) by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government. The cuts were originally outlined in 2011 in a London Underground Limited (LUL) *Operational Strategy Discussion Paper* (OSDP) that was leaked to the RMT union. The OSDP was part of £5 billion in cuts to the London transport budget. It included up to 1,500 job cuts, including 770 supervisors and managers, the closure of all ticket offices, and a move to driverless operation on 80 percent of trains.

In November, Conservative mayor Boris Johnson revealed that all ticket offices would be closed by 2015. He announced 24-hour weekend tube services to obscure the full scale of the proposed cuts in staffing, wages and conditions.

For remaining staff, it means the rewriting of contracts, pay freezes, wage cuts and loss of pension entitlements. Local station managers and station supervisors will have to reapply for their jobs. Ticket office and station control room assistants will lose their jobs. There will be a wage cut of around £300 a month. For supervisors who are unsuccessful in applying for their jobs, that figure will double. All staff will be put in a pool and sent wherever necessary to cover shortages. In some cases, they will have to travel miles. Many stations will be left unmanned.

There was a 40 percent turnout for the strike ballot, with 77 percent voting in favour of strike action and action short of strikes. Of the 3,356 votes cast, 2,567 voted to strike. This represents a clear demand by LUL

workers for a fight, but the low turnout also indicates a widespread distrust in the leadership of the RMT. This is not surprising, given the long experience of the union bureaucracy's sabotage of countless struggles.

Although the RMT could call strikes within seven days under the anti-trade union laws, they have chosen to delay action by almost one month more. Dates have been set for two 48-hour strikes on February 4/5 and 11/12. This gives TfL and LUL management time to organise an effective strike-breaking operation with the government, and allow LUL's "voluntary redundancy" offers to take effect. By the time of the first strike, approximately three months will have elapsed since the official announcement of the proposed ticket office closures.

After the January 10 ballot result, the RMT and the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA), which represents managers and supervisory grades, reentered talks in a renewed effort to reach an agreement. Both unions walked out of the talks, with TSSA announcing a hasty ballot of their members for January 25.

The majority of London Underground drivers support the action, but the Associated Society of Locomotive Steam Enginemen and Firemen (ASLEF) is determined to play the same role it did during the last major Underground strikes, encouraging drivers not to honour picket lines.

The RMT wasted months appealing to Johnson to stick by his electoral promise not to close any more ticket offices. Its policy is echoed by TSSA general secretary Manuel Cortes, who blamed Johnson's "reckless" behaviour for the strike ballot, saying the mayor had "come into office in 2008 with a firm pledge to keep open every ticket office."

This is the same mayor who has campaigned for many years for a ban on the right to strike for LUL

workers.

Finn Brennan, the ASLEF's District 8 organiser (covering LUL), recently wrote, "We are not against change." If the mayor wants "changes," they should "sit down and negotiate them."

The RMT has sought to cover its collusion with management by launching a phoney legal inquiry into whether LUL's voluntary redundancy offer was legal because it occurred during an (equally phoney) 90-day consultation period. As with the recent elimination of the conductor grade on London Overground, the RMT is asking only that the company stand by the agreed procedures used over the last 30 years to liquidate tens of thousands of jobs.

A wave of disputes is again erupting across the London transport network among workers represented by the RMT. Again, the RMT is isolating and betraying each one to prevent a unified struggle against TfL, the mayor and the coalition government. When guards on the London Overground were involved in a 48-hour strike, drivers were not asked to join them. There have been separate ballots for disputes on the Docklands Light Railway and disputes over casualisation and maintenance.

These are part of wider attacks on transportation nationally. Some 500 jobs are at risk from the merger of Thameslink, Southern Rail and Great Northern Rail services through the bidding for private franchises.

The present offensive against London Underground workers comes three years after the RMT called off strikes at the end of 2010 and agreed to the loss of 800 ticket office jobs. Former RMT National Executive member Janine Booth, of the pseudo-left Workers Liberty, was directly implicated in imposing these cuts. She then engaged in a duplicitous PR campaign to cover up her own and the RMT's betrayals. (see: "The trade unions and the ex-left: A reply to a British union official") The sabotage of that strike emboldened LUL to bring forward plans to eliminate all ticket offices.

To launch the current strike ballot, the RMT called a mass meeting on 26 November. Representatives of the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party, Workers Liberty and various Stalinist organisations shouted down any criticism of the RMT under the banner of "unity." On January 16, the RMT is hosting another public meeting. Among the speakers will be the Green Party's Baroness Jenny Jones and Labour MP Jeremy

Corbyn. Both the Greens and the Labour Party are implementing the government's austerity measures wherever they are in power.

The Socialist Equality Party intervened at November's meeting with a statement, "Defend ticket office staff: For independent rank and file committees." It warned tube workers of RMT general secretary Bob Crow's defence of the sell-out of Grangemouth oil refinery workers a month earlier. At Grangemouth, the union Unite had agreed to job cuts, a three-year pay freeze, massive cuts to bonuses, the gutting of final salary pensions and a no-strike deal. The statement noted, "The betrayal of hundreds of strikes and struggles since the privatisation of the railways and the Metronet services on LUL shows the real measure of the left talkers in the RMT leadership. They sell jobs while continuing to draw their own fat salaries."

It continued, "The union leaders' transformation into agents of LUL management is the outcome of their pro-capitalist policies. Their essential function is to maintain the profits of the corporations at the expense of workers and to impose budget cuts. They do so because their own highly privileged positions are based on maintaining the status quo by impoverishing the working class under conditions of deepening economic crisis."

The statement concluded by urging workers to build "new organisations of industrial and political struggle, free of the suffocating grip of the trade unions" and to form "rank and file committees" to take the struggle to defend jobs "out of the hands of the RMT and turn to workers on the rail, buses, post, hospitals, education in Britain, throughout Europe and internationally."



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