

RMT rail union calls off London Docklands Light Railway strikes

Tom Pearce
30 January 2014

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union has called off two planned 48 hour strikes on the London Docklands Light Railway after reaching a resolution with the operator, Serco.

Transport for London (TfL) announced the cancellation on their website Tuesday. The first strike was due to take place Wednesday and today, after the union announced the industrial action last week in a dispute over pay and working conditions.

Providing no details about its agreement with Serco, Bob Crow, RMT General Secretary, said in a two sentence statement that the union's "decision-making body" agreed to suspend the planned industrial action, "following the receipt of improved offers on pay and across a range of other issues."

Crow added, "The union congratulates our members across the Docklands Light Railway whose solidarity and determination has enabled them to secure important victories on pay, conditions and workplace justice."

The union had previously raised concerns over the abuse of disciplinary and attendance procedures as well as limited staff opportunities due to "failure on training, development and grade progression."

The strike was called off by the RMT after workers had voted overwhelmingly to strike. The RMT has around 500 members on the DLR, and reported a 70 percent turnout for the ballot, with majorities of more than nine to one for strike action.

Crow acknowledged it was not the bureaucracy but its members at DLR who had initiated the struggle. He said, "It is those members of staff, out of sheer frustration, who requested this ballot and it is now down to the management side to understand the level of anger and to start talking positively with a view to resolving the catalogue of complaints that they have allowed to build up."

The ballot result provided clear evidence of the anger of transport workers and their determination to fight. The RMT for its part has sought to isolate and sabotage every recent dispute across the TfL network.

The line serves east London and the Docklands financial district. At the centre of the dispute were continued delays to talks on the 2014 pay award. The union also cited the company's abuse of disciplinary and attendance procedures, the use of agency and contract staff to undermine jobs and conditions and shortcomings in training, development and grade progression.

Crow had declared that the union "will not tolerate the cavalier abuse of procedures, agreements and pay negotiations, which has led to the complete breakdown of industrial relations on this vital section of the London transport operation."

But these abuses have already happened, even as the RMT colludes with management. It has continued to negotiate with the government over job losses, pay and conditions. Crow's comments show that the union's primary concern is maintaining its position as the vehicle for imposing attacks.

In setting the dates for the aborted industrial action, the RMT made sure that it would not be effective in uniting the DLR workers with two 48-hour walkouts against the proposed closure of all ticket offices on the London Underground, with the loss of 1,000 jobs. Only the second DLR strike was to coincide with the ticket office dispute.

The last period has seen a complete absence of any coordinated action by the unions, even across such limited strikes as these. Strikes have been restricted to token gestures, isolated by area and grade. There was no coordination of action by teachers and university lecturers, for example, although their strikes took place

within weeks of each other.

In 2010 a one-day strike by tube workers coincided with an incipient strike movement of firefighters and journalists. Crow and the RMT prevented any unification of these struggles. They isolated tube workers, who were forced to keep the network running with insufficient emergency cover in the event of a fire. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) then suspended their proposed strike.

In December the RMT facilitated the elimination of 130 conductor jobs--an entire grade--on London Overground (LOROL), before launching a protest to ensure management uphold the agreements established to stifle any opposition to the job losses. The union isolated the LOROL dispute from workers across the rest of the TfL network.

In 2012 Crow used a Trades Union Congress march to call on Labour Party leader Ed Miliband to oppose spending cuts. As Miliband had already pledged to continue the cuts imposed by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, this was worthless demagoguery. Crow was cheered enthusiastically by his pseudo-left supporters in the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party when he called for a 24-hour general strike.

The DLR has been the site of numerous attacks on conditions, all implemented by the union. A "train captain" is the sole member of staff on board the driverless trains. The train captain does everything on board, including driving the train to a safe location in the event of a system failure. Train captains are paid substantially less than tube drivers.

In 2010 the RMT overturned two emphatic votes for strike action against unpaid increases in workload through the introduction of trains with an additional carriage. Instead the union pushed through a deal based on a one-off payment of £600 that the company immediately began to claw back through speed-ups.

Ahead of the 2012 Olympics the RMT agreed to greater flexibility linked to productivity deals. The DLR was confronting an all-day peak service with an increase of 57 percent in passenger loads and 45,000 additional hours of work. The deal for train captains was tied to an attendance bonus and guaranteed minimum overtime of five hours a week.

Early in 2011 the courts ruled another overwhelming strike vote illegal on a technicality. That ballot, shortly after the dispute over additional workloads, was called

over the company's failure to consult on redundancies, a new pension plan, work timings and the dismissal of two workers.

Crow's script has not changed since then. His concern is not combating the assault on transport workers, but ensuring the union maintains its role in implementing that assault.

In 2011, as now, Crow had accused the company of "a total disregard for the idea of proper negotiation and consultation". He said, "The industrial relations situation at Serco Docklands cannot be tolerated any longer. Our overwhelming vote for this strike has shown management we mean business... It is up to the company to respond positively to our demands for a solution that addresses all of the issues at the heart of this dispute."

It has yet to be revealed just what the RMT's latest "victory" consists of.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact