

London Underground strike shuts down capital

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A powerful 48-hour strike by thousands of London Underground (LU) workers began at 9 p.m. on Tuesday.

LU workers voted massively in favour of strikes and an overtime ban against the loss of more than 1,000 jobs, through the closure of all 265 ticket offices.

Members of the Rail Maritime Transport workers union (RMT) and the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) closed down or reduced to a trickle services across London. Scenes of chaos ensued Wednesday morning, as huge crowds swelled outside closed stations.

The efforts of Transport for London (TfL) to organise a strikebreaking operation had a negligible impact, with 70 percent of normal services cancelled. An attempt to mobilise volunteer strikebreaking “ambassadors,” invoking the 2012 Olympic “volunteering” spirit, failed miserably.

If it were not for the drivers’ trade union, the Associated Society of Locomotive Steam Enginemen and Firemen (ASLEF), representing approximately 50 percent of LU drivers, pressuring drivers to cross picket lines, the entire network would have ground to a halt. Drivers are the next grade to confront a major assault by LU.

Conservative Party mayor of London Boris Johnson and the Confederation of British Industry claimed that due to a 40 percent turnout in the union ballot, the strike was invalid.

As the strength of the strike confirms, workers who did not vote were not opposed to strikes, but were concerned whether the RMT leadership is willing to pursue a full-blown struggle against the budget cuts.

These claims were directed in support of proposals made last year by London Conservatives, urging legislation restricting the right to strike on the Underground. At the time, these proposals were not acted upon, but the BBC reported that the Conservatives plan to include legislation against strikes in the 2015 general election campaign. The BBC reported that “the

government said it was looking ‘very, very closely’ at plans to declare London Underground an essential service.” This means that “London Underground would be subject to a ‘minimum service agreement’ under which staff would be required to keep a core level of services going regardless of any industrial action.”

A similar dictatorial arrangement was used on Spain’s Madrid Metro during strikes in 2010. Staff were placed under military discipline for threatening to break minimum service requirements.

In response to the collapse of last-minute talks to avert the strike, politicians from all main political parties lined up to denounce the LU workers. Prime Minister David Cameron declared, “[RMT general secretary] Bob Crow’s Tube strike is shameful, bringing misery to millions of Londoners. Ed Miliband should condemn it now: no ‘ifs’ and no ‘buts’.”

Labour leader Miliband duly obliged, describing the strike as “deeply regrettable.”

Val Shawcross, London Assembly Labour Group Transport spokeswoman, described LU as having “some interesting ideas in their plans and modernisation is needed,” urging only that Londoners should be given the chance through a period of consultation to “improve them.”

In reality, the plan for mass ticket office closures was initiated by former Labour London mayor Ken Livingstone.

Johnson, speaking on behalf of the financial elite, described the strikes as “outrageous”, while complaining that his paymasters in the exclusive streets of mega-rich London were being “held to ransom by this tiny minority.”

The hypocrisy of this statement will not be lost on workers. It is Johnson’s administration that represents a “tiny minority”, holding the population to ransom as he deploys a brutal social cleansing housing policy, designed

to drive workers out of central London and clear the playgrounds of the super-rich and upper middle class of any signs of the poverty they have created.

The strike is all the more significant in the face of concerted efforts by the RMT and TSSA bureaucracy to head it off. In the week up to the strike, union officials were in continuous talks at the conciliation service ACAS.

The pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party claimed that the RMT bureaucracy is in the forefront of a fight against government austerity. But the RMT and TSSA are not pursuing a political industrial struggle against TfL budget cuts, never mind the coalition government. TSSA's Manuel Cortes summed this up, telling the mayor to "stop playing politics with the Tube."

What distinguished the conduct of Crow and Cortes in the lead-up to the strike were increasingly desperate appeals to Johnson to give them some excuse to call off the strikes.

As the strike deadline approached, Crow declared he "would love to call the strike off" if only Johnson agreed to *suspend* job cuts prior to consultation. If the Mayor "won't come to us" then we will "engage by travelling to him," he said.

On Tuesday morning, Crow and Cortes went to City Hall and waited for Johnson to see them. He left them waiting. Undaunted, Crow then phoned up the London Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) show being hosted by Johnson live on air, stating, "Boris, we can call it off but it takes two to tango. Sit round a table; we cannot do it while you put a gun to our head." Following the call, Crow and Cortes continued sitting in the foyer of City Hall, leaving later in the day.

Crow followed this up on BBC London Radio on Wednesday morning (the first full strike day) by stating, "We have always had job cuts, it is the way you go about it."

Ahead of the current strike, the RMT did everything in its power to sabotage, call off or hold back struggles in order to isolate LU workers.

In December, the RMT, representing London Overground Rail Operations Limited (LOROL) conductors on London Overground, aided the private franchise firms (Hong Kong metro company MTR and the German state railway company, Deutsche Bahn) and TfL by calling off strikes. It assisted in the orderly elimination of the entire safety-critical grade of conductor, with the loss of 130 posts and the imposition of driver-only operation.

The RMT then called off strikes on January 31

demanding by Docklands Light Rail (DLR) workers, who voted nine to one to strike over a whole range of issues. DLR and LU workers had expected to strike together. Many workers told Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners of their anger, when, days before LU strikes, the RMT did a deal with TfL and called off the DLR strike action.

TfL was prepared to pay a small price to prevent a united struggle by the two sets of workers—agreeing to a pay deal that was already overdue and one extra annual leave day to be taken this year as a "good-will" gesture.

Another struggle called off was the dispute of Carlisle cleaning and security workers at DLR, campaigning for a living wage. On January 30, the RMT announced that planned strikes by the Carlisle staff had been called off and a settlement imposed.

At present, the RMT is holding back a major dispute facing former Metronet engineers on the London Underground, where a total "breakdown in industrial relations" has been reported by the engineering branch. Again, the RMT took it off the agenda, stating in a circular that if talks with management failed, it would be referred to ACAS.

SEP campaigners have distributed hundreds of copies of a statement, "Defend ticket office staff: For independent rank and file committees," at 75 key LU and DLR stations across the network. The SEP has insisted that the struggle can only be taken forward and a broad offensive against the coalition government mounted by breaking with the RMT, TSSA and ASLEF bureaucracy. New independent rank-and-file organisations of class struggle must be built, guided by a socialist alternative to the bankrupt capitalist system.



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