

Rail unions betray London Underground strike

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Once again the trade unions have turned a potential offensive by the working class into a rout.

On Tuesday the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) union and Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) cancelled the second scheduled 48-hour strike by London Underground (LU) workers against the planned closure of ticket offices across the network, with the loss of 950 jobs.

The strike was sabotaged just hours before it was due to go ahead at 9pm.

The unions ended the action despite London Underground's refusal to back down on any of the attacks it intends to impose, as part of Transport for London's overall £225 million cuts programme.

The agreement was reached after talks between LU and the unions at the conciliation service ACAS. LU said there will be "two months of intensive talks, to examine LU's proposals in detail, during which time there will be no further industrial action."

A "station by station" review will be undertaken, which could result in "some ticket offices remaining open."

The unions ended the dispute just a week after a strike on February 4 and 5 brought the capital to a standstill and won widespread support from London's population.

The capitulation was reprehensible, even by the normal standards of the union bureaucracy. The unions surrendered under conditions in which the Conservative Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, in response to the first strike, called for a strike ban in "essential services" such as the London Underground. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), the main train drivers' union, as is now usual, scabbed on that strike.

The TSSA, with around 900 members, largely in the

ticket offices earmarked for closure, was the first to call off Tuesday's strike. "We have now agreed a process where all our serious concerns over safety and job losses will be seriously addressed through the normal channels," it said.

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) has 8,300 members working on the Tube. It followed TSSA's announcement by putting out a memo to members saying it would enter into a "detailed discussion in respect of London Underground's Fit for the Future—Stations proposals. It is acknowledged that as a result of these discussions with the trades unions, *the proposals could be subject to change*."

The talks would centre on "a station-by-station review including ticket office closures *which could result in some ticket offices remaining open* " said the memo [emphasis added].

The bulk of job losses will clearly go ahead, with perhaps a few ticket offices at major stations maintained.

The main aim of the union bureaucracy all along was to ensure that they retained their role in imposing cuts on the workforce. Their main objection was that this had been denied to them when LU unilaterally announced the attacks on the workforce in November.

General Secretary Bob Crow said the RMT was "forced and provoked into a dispute that we never wanted," adding, "RMT is happy to discuss any issues with LU through the machinery of negotiation and we are glad that we have now got back to where we should have been right at the start of this process."

LU's head, Mike Brown, in welcoming the deal, stated, "We have always said that we want the unions to engage fully with us, to help shape our proposals for the future of the Tube."

Commenting on the agreement, BBC London Transport correspondent Tom Edwards observed, “London Underground’s modernisation plan survives (albeit it is suspended for now) and you would expect to eventually see many of the proposals with some ticket office closures.”

“What it really means is that we are now back at the beginning. The process of modernisation can start, but with the unions involved,” he added.

No real sacrifice was involved on the part of LU. It was highly probable that keeping some offices open was always their fallback position.

LU remains on the warpath, insisting that its cuts were going to be implemented with the help of the unions. Brown told the London *Evening Standard*, “This is a change programme where unfortunately jobs have to go, but inevitably and without fear of failure change will happen.” He added, “We will get the unions’ views station by station. We are going to have visitor information centres at places such as Victoria and King’s Cross and it is possible some of the bigger stations [London Bridge and Waterloo] we might review... but this is the exception to the rule. The reality is booking offices are from the Victorian age.”

Brown claimed “the same form of words” from the LU that ended the dispute this week was almost accepted by the unions just before last week’s strike.

RMT and the TSSA have a history of professing their opposition to attacks on the workforce, while collaborating behind the scenes to implement them. In 2011, the RMT closed down a series of powerful strikes, helping management to impose 800 jobs cuts at stations and ticket offices.

Crow said to London LBC radio station immediately after Tuesday’s sell-out that the dispute was about, “how they apply these job losses. There’s nothing unusual about job losses. They happen from time to time with all types of different industries that we deal with as well. It’s the nature of how you handle it.”

As could be expected the unions’ betrayal solicited nothing but apologetics from various pseudo-left outfits, who are longtime collaborators of Crow and the RMT.

Workers Liberty baldly stated, “The suspension of the action is not a sell-out.”

After falsely claiming “management agreed some concessions,” through gritted teeth they admitted there

were “no definite, specific commitments to back down on the proposals” from LU.

The Socialist Workers Party wrote a short piece, describing how the strike was called off as if talking about the changing of the weather. Not a single criticism was made, even as they conceded that “there is no guarantee that jobs will be saved.”

The Socialist Party (SP), whose former member Steve Hedley is RMT Assistant General Secretary, are Crow’s closest political allies—with the RMT leader acting as the figurehead for its Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition electoral front. Up to their necks in what had transpired, the SP wrote in effusive terms, “RMT members will see this as an important development. Before the strike LU was utterly intransigent but now they have also indicated that they are even prepared to revisit the issue of ticket office closures.”

Ecstatic that the union bureaucracy was to once again be fully involved in hiring and firing, the SP wrote, “They have also agreed that the terms of the consultation will be mutually agreed and that they will take place at company council level—whereas previously they were at a level that couldn’t challenge the economics of the LU proposal.”

In a feeble attempt to justify Crow’s actions, the SP insisted, “Members expect their representatives to exploit every opportunity to negotiate.”

Crow and his cheerleaders deserve nothing but contempt. LU workers gave the union a mandate to oppose job losses. Instead, they used this as a mandate to organise job cuts.

The wrecking of yet another offensive by a powerful group of workers demonstrates that no avenue of struggle remains open through the trade unions. What is required is the development of a rank and file insurgency against these decrepit organisations.



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