

London Underground workers in 48-hour walkout

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London Underground (LU) workers began strike action at 9 p.m. Monday for 48 hours, after talks between the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and management broke down.

Called over plans to close ticket offices and axe up to 1,000 jobs, the strike comes nearly three months after the union called off the previous strike. Another strike, for 72 hours, has been scheduled for May 5 over the closures, which are part of a £225 million cuts programme by Transport for London (TfL).

In a separate dispute, RMT members began a 48-hour strike at 3 o'clock Monday morning on the Heathrow Express. A record number of buses have had to be put on London's roads to try and keep the capital moving.

The action underscores the social power of the working class and its determination to oppose the assault on jobs and conditions. The strike severely affected services across the capital, as Conservative MPs accused strikers of "economic sabotage"—this from representatives of a government that is implementing the largest austerity package since the 1930s.

At the same time, the job action also confirms that the greatest obstacle to workers' resistance is the transport unions, which have hobbled any action from the start.

In November, Conservative mayor of London Boris Johnson announced that all Underground ticket offices would be closed by 2015. He attempted to hide the full impact of the proposed cuts in staffing, wages and conditions with the announcement of 24-hour weekend tube services.

There was a majority vote for strike action within the RMT. Members of the clerical Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) also voted to strike.

But there was a notable lack of urgency from the RMT, the largest union on the Underground. At an

emergency meeting called by the union in November, Bob Crow, then general secretary, said some people had accused the RMT of "jumping the gun." "What are we supposed to do?" he asked with a rhetorical flourish. "Wait till January?"

In fact, the ballot over strike action did close in January. Although the union was legally able to call strike action within seven days of the result, it delayed action by a further month. This meant a delay of almost three months from the original announcement of job losses, giving TfL and LU management a chance to organise strikebreaking operations.

A 48-hour strike on February 4 and 5 brought the capital to a standstill. In response, the RMT and TSSA cancelled a second 48-hour strike just hours before it was due to start, re-entering negotiations with LU, even though the company had refused to back down on any of its plans.

The RMT's decision to return to the table was to establish its authority in imposing the cuts. A memo to members stated, "It is acknowledged that as a result of these discussions with the trades unions, the proposals *could be* subject to change" [emphasis added].

The unions accepted that new talks would centre on "a station-by-station review including ticket office closures," as the RMT put it. In a damningly pathetic boast, the union claimed that such a review " *could* result in some ticket offices remaining open" [emphasis added].

The full scale of the intended cuts is now becoming clearer.

The RMT has met LU management 40 times since February's strike, according to reports. The TSSA remains in negotiation and is not striking.

The RMT complains that no station-by-station review has been conducted since February. The union's

Stations & Revenue Functional Council reports, “Only five sample stations were looked at and not one ticket office has been restored to LU’s proposal.” The General Grades Committee announcement of strike action reported, “despite 8 weeks of discussions...[LU] are still maintaining that every ticket office will close by the end of 2015.”

The job losses have also been extended. From the 953 ticket office staff originally targeted, LU has now indicated that another 840 frontline posts will be axed. The removal of 1,800 operational posts will be accompanied by the creation of 900 managerial roles, giving an average ratio of one manager to every four workers. Some station supervisors are facing a wage cut of up to £8,000.

The RMT is desperately trying to keep its place at the table under conditions where TfL and LU are determined to push ahead with cuts. The union has told press that it would have suspended the current strike if LU had agreed to a public consultation over the plans.

Johnson has stated bluntly that their plans are unchanged: “We’re going to close 260 ticket offices, we’re going to change the way they operate, we’re going to make them available for other functions, we’re going to do fantastic things with our stations, but there’s always room to discuss about the terms and conditions of our employees.”

After February’s sellout, Crow had said the dispute was about “how to apply these job losses.... [Job losses] happen from time to time.... It’s the nature of how you handle it.”

This is the union’s modus operandi. Already, the RMT has enabled TfL to implement staggered job losses over a protracted period. The current job cuts were revealed in a 2011 “Operational Strategy Discussion Paper” (OSDP) widely circulated to the transport unions. Earlier that year, the RMT had called off a series of powerful strikes, enabling management to cut 800 jobs at stations and ticket offices. The unions then prevented any coordinated response to the OSDP.

There is huge anger amongst Underground workers, which is reflected in the fact that the RMT has had to schedule two- and three-day strikes, rather than its usual one-day stoppages to let off some steam.

But the actions divide workers sectionally across the TfL network, separating the battle over ticket office closures from the action over jobs and conditions on the

Heathrow Express, thereby weakening their fighting capacity.

In November, the RMT facilitated the elimination of 130 conductors’ jobs on London Overground (LOROL), part of the TfL network. Only conductors were balloted for strike action, which was then called off when LOROL had agreed to “no compulsory redundancies.” Tube workers confronting the axing of 950 ticket office jobs were told nothing of this, and no attempt was made to unite these workers.

Management is heavily touting its line of “no compulsory redundancies” and “natural wastage” as a means of axing jobs, presenting this as somehow fair and just.

TfL and Johnson took out full-page adverts entitled “Tube modernisation: Fairness to staff guaranteed.” This repeated the claim that “not a single member of staff will be forced out of LU.”

Management is using “Voluntary Severance” packages to achieve its aims, taking advantage of the union’s refusal to organise genuine resistance, in favour of drawn-out action, to wear down opposition. Some 650 workers have reportedly applied for VS already.

The fight to defend jobs and wages on LU must be taken out of the hands of the unions. It requires an independent rank-and-file committee uniting transport workers, transport users and other workers in a rebellion against the union bureaucracy.

This is above all a political struggle. LU workers, as with all other workers, are not simply engaged in a struggle against one or another employer. Behind LU stand the corporate and financial elite and their state apparatus.

Against this, workers require their own political party—one that is committed to the abolition of the profit system and its agenda of permanent austerity, militarism and war, in the fight for a workers’ government based on socialist policies.



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