RMT union sabotages London Underground strike

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8 May 2014

The announcement by the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) that it has "suspended" the second of two strikes against job losses on the London Underground should be greeted with contempt.

It is an act of sabotage.

This betrayal, the second in three months, confirms that the RMT's concern is not the fight for jobs but the defence of its privileged position in negotiating with management the dismantling of its members' conditions.

In November, Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson announced the closure of all 260 London Underground (LU) ticket offices by 2015, with the loss of nearly 1,000 jobs. Johnson and Transport for London (TfL), which oversees the capital's transport network, dressed this up as a modernisation programme to disguise the full scale of cuts.

These plans had been on the table since 2011. The "Operational Strategy Discussion Paper" (OSDP), circulated to the unions, had outlined proposals to close all ticket offices and replace them with information centres at the busiest stations. The OSDP also proposed introducing driverless trains on various lines across the network.

The OSDP followed the elimination of 800 station and ticket office jobs earlier that year. Then, the RMT and the clerical Transport and Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) scaled back and called off a series of strikes against these cuts. The unions effectively enforced binding arbitration and a meaningless review process on workers while management pushed ahead with their plans.

The unions then spent two years opposing any coordinated offensive across TfL against the measures. Even as Underground workers were confronting ticket office job losses in November, the RMT was enabling the elimination of 130 conductor jobs on London Overground (LOROL).

Members of the RMT, the largest union on Underground, voted for strike action against the ticket office cuts, as did members of the TSSA.

The unions took nearly three months to organise a 48-hour stoppage. This was done deliberately so as to enable the company to push ahead with its "Voluntary Severance" scheme under which 650 staff have reportedly applied.

Even as the first strike went ahead, the unions were at pains to make clear they would suspend action in return for negotiations. This was under conditions in which LU had refused to back down on any of its proposed cuts. After 40 meetings between the unions and management, no job losses had been reversed and a further 840 frontline cuts were announced. Excited talk of a "station-by-station" review by the RMT was meant to conceal these facts.

Last week's strike was again solid. But just hours before the second 72-hour walkout was due to begin, RMT acting general secretary Mick Cash announced that the strike had been "suspended" on the basis of an agreement at ACAS.

The RMT accepted three points:

1: "The station-by-station review will continue with all the trades unions invited to participate and contribute."

As LU Chief Operating Officer Phil Hufton greeted the suspension of the strike saying, "Modernisation of the Tube means that it is our intention to close all ticket offices," this can only mean the unions being used to sanction and implement cuts. They have long accepted this role.

Presenting a table of what LU wanted and what the

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RMT has "won," the union's London Transport Regional Committee publication *London Calling* admits that where the company wanted "to press ahead with cuts and closures" the union has achieved only "a pause while they review implementation plans with the unions." It also reveals what the "review involves, advising members to "make the case for each station's staffing level and ticket office."

There will also be a review of LU's "Fit for the Future—Stations" implementation plan, during which time the company will "continue to keep on hold all VS [Voluntary Severance] applications."

2: "The outcome of the exercise will be discussed at a meeting chaired by ACAS."

The union has increasingly looked to ACAS, the conciliation service set up in the interests of big business, as the appropriate vehicle for its activities.

3: "LU would enter into further detailed discussions to ensure that any employees identified as in scope of the 'Fit for the Future—Stations' proposals … who do not choose to leave the business under voluntary severance, would be offered a role that involves no reduction in their current substantive salary."

The RMT presents this as a victory as it ends any threatened loss of pay, but it also implies accepting the company's VS scheme (which the union claims to oppose).

LU had previously demanded as a precondition that the RMT call off strike action and withdraw from the current dispute, which would have meant reballoting. Cash claims LU's withdrawal of this condition, which allows the union to claim the strike is "suspended," is a great victory.

It is as grotesque as it is contemptible to suggest that workers should celebrate not being required to abandon strike action by voluntarily abandoning a strike.

There is clearly unease within RMT ranks, which is why the union tops want to maintain the illusion of a fight. Their actions, however, demonstrate that no avenue of struggle remains open through the trade unions.

It also reveals the bankruptcy of the pseudo-left parties that make up the unions' apparatus. Faced with open betrayal the pseudo-lefts are forced to offer token criticisms, but do so only to appeal for more of the same.

The Socialist Workers Party wrote of last week's strike that "Unfortunately the TSSA didn't strike this time." They stressed they meant no serious criticism, as the TSSA "still opposes the cuts." Escalating RMT strikes, they say, can win "solidarity from other union members."

Workers Liberty (WL) initially posted the official RMT announcement without comment. The following day they repeated the union's claims about the review and the end of any threatened loss of pay, and referred to "a settlement" being reached with management. WL's Janine Booth was on the RMT Executive at the time of the 2011 betrayal, when she presented review procedures and arbitration as a viable form of action to defend jobs.

WL acknowledge that "this deal is not perfect," but claim it is "an advance" that "does buy us some time to try and step up our organisation and press for more concessions."

The union, which has known about these plans since 2011, has already given TfL six months. How much time do they want?

WL's response is to appeal to the RMT's Parliamentary Group and supporters within the Greater London Assembly. This means appealing to the Labour Party which, under former Mayor Ken Livingstone, part-privatised the Underground. WL also calls for the development of a "Hands Off London Transport" coalition that aims to reassert the union's authority.

Workers must draw lessons from these events. They must begin to organise their own rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the sabotage of the trade unions.

Above all, what is required is a new political party in, of and for the working class—a party committed to a socialist programme and the formation of a workers' government, which puts the interests of society before those of the financial aristocracy. The Socialist Equality Party is that party.

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