

UK rail union's "Listen to London" conference a fiasco

Michael Barnes
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Last month, the Rail Maritime Transport Workers union (RMT) held a conference at the Trades Union Congress headquarters, entitled "Listen to London—Tube Cuts Conference". It was called to answer growing recognition among workers that the RMT's calling off of strikes earlier this year was a betrayal of mass popular action against the threatened closure of all 260 London Underground (LU) ticket offices and their transformation into retail outlets.

The conference, a gathering of the well-heeled upper-middle class opponents of the working class, was a crude effort by the Labour Party, the Green Party and pseudo-left organizations to defend the unions from mounting criticism of their betrayals and to subordinate any future struggles to the re-election of a Labour government.

Ticket office closures represent only 6 percent of the first phase of £4.2 billion cuts, imposed when the government slashed funding by 12.2 percent.

In the months prior to July's conference, the RMT had secured massive strike votes on a range of issues across LU and Transport for London (TfL) involving TfL workers, cleaners, Tube line track workers on the Jubilee line, power controllers, ticket office staff, fleet members, canteen staff, drivers and so on. Together these formed a powerful basis for a united counteroffensive against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's brutal austerity program and would have won popular support throughout the country.

Instead, the union ensured that each issue was dealt with in isolation and spread disunity, enabling LU to press ahead with the next phases of cuts.

Billed beforehand by the RMT as a "major conference", it attracted only 25 attendees. As the discussion ensued, it became clear the majority were

lower-ranking pseudo-left trade union officials. It was a discussion in the upper echelons of the unions and political elite on how to disrupt and divert into a dead end any future struggles by transport workers.

Mick Cash, acting president of the RMT, repeated the union's bankrupt mantra of demanding London Conservative Party Mayor Boris Johnson stick by his electoral promise of not closing booking offices. Cash urged Johnson to give the union a consultation procedure, in other words, a legal cover for cuts. In response, the Mayor has demanded even greater curbs on the right to strike, if not an outright ban under "minimum" service requirements.

Cash urged using the period up to next May's general election to get London Members of Parliament "onside", leaving the fate of LU workers in the hands of parties committed to austerity. Cash attacked union members who have denounced their treacherous role, stating, "Our suspension of industrial action" is not due to a "lack of commitment by this union". He sent a message to the Mayor that the RMT called off strike action "because we are a responsible trade union."

Next up was Jenny Jones, Green Party London Assembly member. She described the RMT as "strong" and said she was one of the few who had praised Bob Crow, the deceased former Stalinist general secretary of the RMT, while he was still alive. She said that in any dispute with your employer you would want Bob Crow and the RMT in your corner.

Jones made the absurd claim that the mayor had "no philosophy" and "no idea" where he wants to go. This crude attempt to deny that Johnson's policies have any class content will not wash with workers. As Jones well knows, the mayor is dedicated to the further enrichment of the "hedge fund kings," as he describes them, a defence of inequality and a privatisation programme of

public assets. Johnson has already indicated that he will rule by directives and deploy strikebreaking operations as he did against London firefighters in 2010.

Jones concluded by saying they had to “rely” on the Labour Party to bring in some “social ideas” but that the party had “lost their way” and are not doing this. Her description of Labour belies the reality, that it functions as a right-wing party of the financial elite, indistinguishable from the Tories.

John Leach, a former RMT president who is standing for the position again in September, spoke from the floor. Last November, he said, he and other union officials had been told by senior managers that “Starship austerity had landed on London Transport.” Senior managers told them that they had got the “Olympics” out of the way and it was “our turn next.”

The Socialist Equality Party was the sole organisation that warned transport workers that the productivity deals and a form of binding arbitration (effectively a no-strike deal), signed by the rail unions ahead of the 2012 Olympics, were proof that they were prepared to collaborate in imposing further attacks on transport workers. Everything that has happened since has confirmed that prognosis.

Leach said the main achievement of the dispute over station closures was to have “locked” LUL management “in negotiations.” The reality is that the trade union bureaucracy called off strike action in order to enter negotiations with an employer which has not retreated one iota and is in fact escalating its attacks.

What has been the result of this “achievement”?

According to Leach, LUL have informed the RMT that in the next pay round they are going to table pension reform where the company intends to slash £638 million. This was only the beginning of a seven-year assault by LUL who are speeding up their plans for driverless trains.

Leach said the RMT would pressure MPs to support their position. The majority of LU workers know that not only the Conservative, Liberal Democrats but also the Labour Party supports austerity and cuts and that Labour has been in the forefront of the privatisation of LU.

To underline the point, the final speaker was RMT-sponsored Labour MP John McDonnell. Labour nationally has refused to include in its general election policies the renationalisation of the railways.

Describing the betrayal of the ticket office dispute as a “lull before the storm”, McDonnell called it an opportunity to assess “what’s happened to us.”

His remarks were an effort to counter the widespread sense of betrayal felt by LU workers who are suffering the consequences in a daily assault on every aspect of their working conditions. Pursuing the isolation tactics even further, McDonnell advocated the break-up of opposition to ticket office closures into local campaigns, calling such a perspective “some of our most successful work.”

In fact, the RMT are currently negotiating with management a station-by-station review. From the standpoint of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, such divisions are critical as they assist government and TfL/LUL to enforce their diktats.

The programme of “localising” struggles is a tried-and-tested means for the union bureaucracy to divide and rule, and set workers against each other in a race to the bottom. It has been the mechanism through which swathes of public services have been closed or privatised, often against the wishes of ordinary participants in the protests.

LU workers and the public rightly stayed away from the “Tube Cuts Conference”. Its proceedings underscored the urgency of workers taking up a new perspective. The defence of jobs, wages working conditions public services and the democratic right to strike cannot be fought by appeals to the political parties of the financial elite, who are conducting an all-out assault on the working class.

The only basis for a unified struggle against the coalition government is for LU workers to break with the pro-capitalist LU unions and form new organizations of struggle, based on a socialist strategy. This appeal to all sections of the working class, youth, the elderly and the unemployed to join new fighting organisations, will win a powerful response.



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