

London Underground workers set to hold second 24-hour strike

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Some 20,000 London Underground (LU) workers, supervisors and managers are due to take part in a second 24 hour strike on Wednesday.

Workers are in dispute over changes to terms and conditions that are planned for the introduction of 24-hour train services on weekends from September.

The first strike on July 8 saw the closure of the entire underground network of 11 lines and 270 stations and left the capital's Overground rail and bus network unable to cope with the massive increase in demand.

The strike dates were called by the four main LU unions, the RMT, ASLEF, TSSA and Unite, after large votes in favour of action and in opposition to the imposition of 24-hour weekend scheduling and an insulting one percent pay rise for 2016-17.

The previous strike prompted an outpouring of vitriol directed at "greedy and overpaid" LU workers by the Conservative government, London mayor and media, and calls for strikes to be banned in "essential services".

The leader of the Conservative group in the London Assembly, Andrew Boff, declared, "We do think we need a change in the law as well, because these drivers are now striking at the drop of a hat with the slightest possible grumble. We're arguing for strikes on public transport to be banned and replaced with a New York-style system of independent judge-led mediation."

The Chief Executive of the right-wing campaign group, the Freedom Association, Simon Richards, railed against "Luddite tube drivers" and the need to roll out driverless trains across the whole network.

These threats should not be taken lightly. They are a warning to all workers that the dispute is not just about the defence of jobs and conditions but a political struggle with the employers and government, which are determined to impose a top to bottom reorganisation of London's transport system to meet the interests of global capital.

The unions did everything to avoid a strike. Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) General Secretary Mick Cash wrote to members on Friday, "A new offer has been tabled today. Our London Underground reps will meet on Monday to look at the detail and we will take a response into the ACAS [arbitration body] talks following that meeting".

On Monday, with management refusing to budge an inch, the unions desperately called for further talks. ASLEF London district organiser Finn Brennan stated, "We would be prepared to continue discussions to try to find common ground, but senior management are insistent that new rosters will be issued this week so that the Night Tube starts on 12 September." He blamed the "pig-headed determination of the mayor to insist on a September 12 launch of night Tube instead of allowing more time for a negotiated settlement to be reached."

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said the RMT would be available for talks with management in the hours leading up to the strike, while TSSA leader Manuel Cortes said they would meet management "anywhere at any time".

LU workers must reject the illusion being peddled by the pseudo-left groups, that the joint action between several unions is the way forward and a sign that the unions can be fighting organisations if enough pressure is applied.

The exact opposite is the case. The unions have played a treacherous role in facilitating attacks on jobs and conditions throughout the railway industry nationally and on London Underground specifically. Their main concern is to prevent a movement of workers deeply opposed to the cuts and the unions' catalogue of betrayal developing outside their control. This would threaten the well paid jobs and privileges of the labor bureaucracy, many of whom are members of pseudo-left parties. (See: The trade unions and the ex-left: A reply to a British union official)

At the same time as the dispute over weekend working and the pay offer is taking place, the huge attack on station staff has continued unabated.

By the end of this year every LU ticket office will be closed, leaving many stations unmanned, over 1,000 station staff and station control room assistants made redundant, administration offices closed, and contracts and job descriptions rewritten. Local station managers and supervisors will have had to reapply for their jobs and take a wage cut of around £300 a month. For supervisors who are unsuccessful in their reapplications, that figure will double. Work rostering will be eliminated and all staff will be put in a pool and sent wherever necessary to cover shortages. In some cases, they will have to travel miles.

These cuts were first revealed in 2011 in the “Fit for the Future—Stations” section of a LU Operational Strategy Discussion Paper (OSDP), itself part of a £7 billion cuts package across the entire London transport system. Ever since the OSDP was leaked, the unions have capitulated to every management demand and isolated station staff from other workers involved in disputes on the Underground and the public services more generally.

In November 2013, on the London Overground network, the RMT assisted in the elimination of the conductor grade and the loss of all 130 jobs, at the same time as London Mayor Boris Johnson officially announced the ticket office closure programme. (See: London Underground prepares mass closure of ticket offices)

In February 2014, two 48-hour strikes on the London Docklands Light Railway (DLR) were due to take place in a dispute over pay and conditions. (See: RMT rail union calls off London Docklands Light Railway strikes)

The then-RMT general secretary, Bob Crow, acknowledged it was not the bureaucracy but its members at DLR who had initiated the struggle “out of sheer frustration” and pleaded that it “was now down to the management side to understand the level of anger and to start talking positively...”

At the same the RMT and TSSA were forced to call a 48-hour strike against the ticket office closures. Crow criticised the axing of “safety critical jobs” at the same time as the Underground was “under growing pressure from customer demand and needs more staff and not less to ensure safe and efficient operation”.

Instead of uniting the two sets of workers in a common struggle, the union engineered a rout. Only the second DLR strike was scheduled to coincide with the ticket

office dispute and in the event, both DLR strikes were called off, leaving the LU workers isolated.

The unions then cancelled strike action on the Underground just hours before it was due to start, and re-entered negotiations with LU, even though the company had refused to back down on any of its demands. After an estimated 40 more meetings, further strike action was called off and a “station-by-station review” agreed pitting each station against the others and clearing the way for LU to proceed with the Fit for the Future programme.

Throughout the drivers’ union, ASLEF, refused to support the station staff, although it was clearly a major objective of LU, outlined in the OSDP, to introduce driverless trains across the whole Underground network. (See: London Underground to press ahead with driverless trains) Workers were told to cross picket lines and report for work. The Unite union, whilst calling on its members to support the station staff, agreed with Transport for London (TfL) and the London Bus companies to run extra buses driven by its members when LU were involved in strike action.

These actions show that the very term “union” has been turned on its head by these organisations. It would be more appropriate to use the term “dis-unions” to describe the way they have split and divided workers, who have time and again shown their willingness to fight back. Under the control of the unions, the militant struggles of transport workers against the cuts and closures programme has failed to slow it down or elicit a single compromise from LU, TfL, the mayor or the government.

This shows the urgent necessity of organising rank-and-file committees, independent of, and in opposition to, the sabotage operations of the trade unions.



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