

London Tube worker describes issues in struggle

Our correspondent
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Some 20,000 train drivers, station staff, managers and other London Underground employees struck for 24 hours on Thursday, shutting down the entire Tube network that provides four million rides a day.

“Drivers are fed up with working for nothing,” one striking London Tube worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “It is too much. Break times of 30 minutes are not paid at work, forcing us to remain at work for eight hours and 30 minutes. At weekends, control centre workers and lower grade managers work 12 hours each day. “Night shifts should be special shifts with proper rest days. It is not about the money, it is about better working conditions.

“The unions claim to defend work-life balance. It is a lie.

“When contractors were first introduced in numbers to the Tube PPP [Public-Private Partnership], it was used to erase the previous right to eight hours work, eight hours rest, eight hours leisure and culture in a 24 hours working day.”

The London Underground PPP was the flagship project of the Private Finance Initiative introduced by the New Labour government for privatising essential public services. Metronet, run by five international corporations, was created in 2003 to maintain and renew the London Underground rail network only to collapse four years later with debts of at least £2 billion.

Metronet’s debts were guaranteed by Transport for London (TfL), LU’s parent body, and ultimately the government, the taxpayers, workforce and travelling public bore the cost.

The rail unions refused to organise against the PPP. Even though rail workers had voted three times for joint action, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) repeatedly called off strikes and overturned

ballots for strike action in an effort to demobilise workers’ opposition to the privatisation of the Tube. Such one day strikes, as were held, were the result of unofficial action.

The train driver continued, “Night running was also proposed by TfL transport commissioner Bob Kiley back in 2005 and consultations held with the stakeholders, that means the unions too.

“The doors were opened to night running with the unions’ agreement to New Year’s Eve trains. But they could not introduce them more widely until the infrastructure was upgraded...to minimise the probability of accidents.

“The moves toward casualization went further during the Olympic Games in 2012 when the trade unions allowed new workers on lower terms contracts to be employed by the management of the Tube for the first time ever in its 150 years history. They are called Project Pool Operators. They can be made to work anywhere, on any line, and they do not have any seniority in relation to other workers.

“The introduction of night work will mean a night shift or day shift and have no qualitative difference in terms of fatigue and rest required between shifts. A night shift will be as common as a day shift. One could finish a night shift at 6am and have to come back to work 12 hours later.

“The aim of the night working is to bring transport workers on a par with the standards operated in Asia. Night running of public transport lengthens the average working day and working time availability of the whole working class in London, as demanded by global capital.

“That means the work life balance will become as is already current practice in other industries in London such as retail.

“Today I heard that the Duty Train Standards Managers—there are about 300 of them—are being phased out in the next two years. They will be replaced by iPads which drivers will book on and put in their request for special leave and other requests.

“Tube workers have tried to keep decent wages and conditions, and I think a lot of other workers respect us for that, despite the papers trying to portray us as lazy and over-paid. There is enough wealth around. Why can’t all workers have more holidays or full wage retirement at 55? Automation should be used to decrease the working week not casualise everything and cut wages. The trouble is I think the unions are quite prepared to give it all up.”



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