

# London Tube workers carry out 24-hour strike

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20,000 London Underground (LU) workers held a 24-hour strike Thursday bringing the capital city of 8.63 million people to a virtual standstill.

The walkout involved train drivers, platform staff, supervisors, management and administrative staff for the London Tube. It was the second 24-hour strike in a month called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA), Unite and the train drivers' union Aslef. (See London trains shut down in rail worker strike)

LU workers are opposed to the terms and conditions demanded by management, which include job cuts, the introduction of 24-hour train service over weekends beginning in September and a derisory one percent pay increase. London's Tory Mayor Boris Johnson, who is also chair of transport, is spearheading these attacks.

Even though the unions deliberately limited the strike, the walkout demonstrated the enormous power of the working class. Although Johnson dispatched 250 buses to transport commuters affected by the strike, the walkout caused an estimated 197 miles of traffic tailbacks in the early morning rush hour and another 500 miles in the evening.

There is widespread support for a fight against the Tory government, which is conducting a savage campaign of austerity and attacks on workers' rights. London is the sharpest example of the enormous class chasm in the UK. It is the home of the largest number of billionaires (80) in the world. At the same time, nearly 600,000 children in the city—or 37 percent of the total—live below the poverty line.

The unions are doing everything to dissipate the strength of workers and demoralize them. Above all, they are determined to prevent the struggle from becoming a catalyst for broader movement of the

working class against the attacks by the Cameron government and all of the big business parties.

In the run-up to the strike, unions appealed to management for further discussions to avert a walkout but were rebuffed as LU refused to back down on its ultimatum. Finn Brennan, district organiser at Aslef, which represents the majority of drivers, said, "We haven't rejected their offer, but London Underground has taken it away by saying all four unions have to respond by 6:30 tonight."

Last month, representatives of the Tory government, Mayor Johnson and their supporters in the right-wing media demanded that LU workers be stripped of the right to strike.

As the strike began, the Conservative-aligned Spectator magazine ran an article by Jonathan Isaby, the Chief Executive of the right-wing TaxPayers' Alliance, headlined, "The Tube is an essential service and should be protected from strikes."

Isaby stated, "The estimated cost of a 24-hour strike (this time, over the plans for a 24-hour Tube service) is some £50 million", and demanded, "It's time for the government to step in." He denounced LU drivers on, "£50,000-plus salaries with extraordinary conditions," and said it is time "TfL [Transport for London] refused once and for all to give in."

He wrote that the fire service is already "regarded as an 'essential service'", and called for "the Tube – and potentially the railway network as a whole--to receive the same designation."

Isaby concluded, "Introducing measures to ensure that one of the world's greatest cities isn't strangled by their obstreperous tantrums might remind the unions that they are at their best when they're constructive--and at their worst when their default response is a costly and disruptive refusal to get on

board with the future.”

The unions have played down the significance of these threats, with RMT Assistant General Secretary Steve Hedley speaking Wednesday on BBC London TV, complaining that the dispute had become political and the unions wanted negotiations without “political interference.”

He said, “We want to get round the table. We’ll fight any political interference by politicians. Let management negotiate properly with the trade unions and let’s get a decent work-life balance not just for train drivers but for all staff.”

These cowardly and ignorant remarks are aimed at disarming workers. The Tories, the Labour Party and all of the City of London-controlled parties are well aware that this is a *political struggle*. Their aim is to break the resistance of the working class to far more sweeping attacks on jobs, living standards, social services and democratic rights, including the right to strike.

The unions are willing to accept all of these attacks as long as they preserve their ability to “get round the table,” i.e., to be partners in the destruction of the hard-won achievements of workers and the funnelling of even more wealth into the hands of the financial aristocracy.

Hedley insisted workers were not in a political struggle even as LU management has been given the green light to make an example of the Tube workers and ban any further strikes.

In fact, over the last decades, the unions have done nothing to oppose the introduction of a battery of anti-union legislation, with the Conservatives now set to bring in even more.

The new attacks follow the government’s announcement last month of a ban on industrial action in most public services unless 50 percent of workers take part in a postal ballot vote and 40 percent vote in favour. Legislation preventing agency workers being sent in to cover the work of strikers will also be repealed.

On the day of the strike, the government announced that the check-off system—the automatic deducting of trade union dues from members’ wages—will be stopped. Currently the ban is only applied to those working at the Home Office, the Revenue and Customs Department and the Ministry of Defence, but it will be

extended to all 3.8 million public sector workers.

Cabinet Office Minister Matthew Hancock condemned the system as “out-dated,” declaring, “In the 21st century era of direct debits and digital payments, public resources should not be used to support the collection of trade union subscriptions.”

The threat to the financial jugular of the union apparatus only makes more likely that the RMT, Unite and the other unions will shut down the struggle as soon as possible and seek a sell out deal to preserve their financial and institutional interests.

On Thursday the RMT urged Mayor Johnson to hold an emergency meeting with the union, saying, “It is now time for the Mayor to reverse his long standing policy of not meeting with the trade unions and to give our negotiators an opportunity to set out the facts to him directly.”

The BBC reported Friday that the unions will resume negotiations on Monday morning at the conciliation service Acas over the nighttime Tube service on weekends in order to prevent another strike.

If this fight is not to be betrayed and defeated like so many others, workers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and form action committees democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves. Only by breaking the grip of the trade union bureaucracy can workers begin to turn this fight into an industrial and political counter-offensive against austerity, job cuts and social inequality.



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