

UK Tube strike: Conservative transport spokesman calls for scab force

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Members of three London Underground trade unions—the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT), Unite, and the Transport Salaried Staff Association—are preparing for two new one-day strikes.

These are set to go ahead between August 25 and 28 over an annual pay rise, job protection and against the imposition of new 24-hour rosters.

They do so after the main drivers' union, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, ASLEF, pulled out.

The other unions are continuing negotiations with London Underground Limited (LUL) at the conciliation service ACAS.

Calling off action was done over the heads of drivers, who fully supported joint strikes but were forced by ASLEF officials to work during two major previous strikes. These were strikes by their colleagues in other grades, who were fighting to defend jobs. If the new strikes go ahead, drivers will again be used to break them, even as they face plans to impose driverless trains in the immediate future.

In an August 14 circular, ASLEF officials said they would not be “dictated” to by other trade unions and allow their members to be used as “battle fodder” by others. It described the situation as being in an “excited state,” stating that at such times you need “a cool head.” That is why ASLEF has pushed “the pause button.”

Train operators will in fact be used as “battle fodder” by the Conservative government and LU management to break their colleagues' strike.

An August 18 *Upfront* newsletter issued by RMT London declared, “All Unions agreed to this [strike] but ASLEF, who seem to be happy with an assurance that Night Tube rosters will not be imposed. They reneged on the agreement to strike and called off action

without discussing it with other unions.”

The statement added, “This is not the time for divisions between union members or sectarian attempts to undermine the industrial action of other unions. If this action has to go ahead we ask every driver in every depot to respect picket lines and join the action as only resolute determination will prevail and get us all the decent deal we deserve.”

These valid criticisms of ASLEF officials could just as easily be used to describe the RMT's betrayal of the 2014 strikes to resist LU's closure of all ticket offices, the majority of which have now been closed and leased to private retailers.

It is not only ASLEF that is helping the company to isolate and betray strikes. RMT and ASLEF members working for Docklands Light Railway (serving London's Docklands financial centre) and London Overground (serving parts of east and south London) were forced to work during the strikes. Thousands of London bus workers, the majority in the Unite union, were also forced to work, allowing TfL to put on 250 extra buses.

On August 4, Richard Tracey, Conservative spokesman for transport for the Greater London Authority (GLA), urged the creation of a strike breaking force. He said, “It's time to establish a pool of relief staff, much like London Fire Brigade's current strike contingency ... This means we'll always have a core service even on strike days and it could be run by retired staff like the fire brigade.”

A scabbing operation was used by the GLA Conservative administration against London fire fighters in 2010, with balaclava-clad scab engine drivers driving at high speed through picket lines, causing a number of injuries.

Tracey authored the GLA Conservatives' 2013

“Struck Out: Reforming London Underground Strike Laws.”

The document called for “Binding Pendulum Arbitration,” replacing the right to strike with a “right to ballot for independent arbitration,” to be overseen by a judge. Although the document concentrates on London Underground, it adds that “the concepts and recommendations within it” could be applied to strikes in other forms of transport “within London and across the UK.”

Tracey’s demands were preceded by a July 9 article in the *Daily Telegraph* by Adrian Quine, who wrote, “Tube drivers are holding us to ransom. So why can’t we just sack them?”

He did not restrict his attack to Tube drivers, but railed against any group (signal workers on the national rail network) who had the power to bring the country to a standstill.

On August 11, Julia Hartley-Brewer, again in the *Telegraph*, responded to a Tube driver who wrote in explaining the difficulties of living in London, even on a driver’s pay, and who asked the question why everyone should not receive a similar wage. Hartley-Brewer, with uncontrolled class hatred, frothed, “You seem to think that you have some God-given right to have spare spending money at the end of the month after all your bills are paid.”

Adding, “You say it will take you four-and-a-half years to save enough for a deposit to buy a home. First, no one has a right to buy their own home. Millions of people never do. Secondly, you quote the cost of a two-bedroom house in Harrow as £361,000. Why on earth do you think the first home you buy should be a HOUSE not a flat?”

This came only days before the High Pay Centre reported that CEO “average” pay for FTSE 100 companies climbed to £4.9 million in 2014, 183 times the average worker’s pay. Sam Bowman, the deputy director of the Adam Smith Institute, said such pay “rewards extraordinary talent and skills,” which is “as close to invaluable as one can get.”

As for the supposed liberals, a comment in the *Guardian* July 9 by Gaby Hinsliff was headed, “RMT has played into the hands of those who yearn for a Thatcher-style crackdown on industrial action.”

Hinsliff acknowledged the record low level of strikes and then lectured workers that the right to strike

“shouldn’t be abused. Supporting the right to free speech doesn’t mean defending every idiot shouting ‘fire!’ in a theatre, and similarly supporting the right to strike shouldn’t have to mean automatically endorsing every walkout.”

The ability of workers to resist these attacks depends on a broader mobilisation of the working class against the Conservative government.

The pseudo-left groups are playing a critical role in disarming workers.

The Socialist Party (SP) has two leading supporters/members on the RMT’s executive. Steve Hedley is the RMT assistant general secretary, and John Reid is the RMT London Transport representative on the union’s executive.

Hedley, speaking in a debate with LUL managing director Nick Brown on BBC London TV, complained that the dispute had become political and the unions wanted negotiations without “political interference.”

In an article July 29 on the SP’s web site, Reid too complained that the attacks on Tube workers were “politically inspired by the pro-austerity measures of the government, which wants to cut £4.2 billion from the transport budget.” But he then advanced a non-political response by the unions: “All we are asking for is for our terms and conditions to be protected and for our pay increases to rise with inflation as a minimum.”

The open intervention of state officials and denunciations of the right to strike show that Tube workers and any others seeking to defend their livelihoods face a political struggle against the capitalist class. This necessitates making an organisational and political break with the political stooges of the ruling elite in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and building new organisations of class struggle and a new socialist leadership.



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