

London Underground unions call off strikes

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29 August 2015

The Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT), Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA) and Unite have cancelled two one-day strikes scheduled on the London Underground (LU) between August 25 and 27.

This follows an earlier decision by the train drivers' union ASLEF to withdraw support. The RMT attacked ASLEF at the time for its acceptance of flimsy promises from LU management over the imposition of 24-hour rostering.

It should be clear that as far as the unions were concerned, the planned strikes had nothing to do with mobilising the working class against the Conservative government's austerity measures. Instead, the threat of walkouts was being used to pressure LU management and safeguard the unions' own role as industrial policemen.

All four unions are now working out the formula with which to force 24-hour work upon their members.

The August 25-27 strikes would have been the third to close down the London Underground network. They were called off after extensive negotiations at the arbitration service ACAS involving all the unions involved and LU management.

Unite regional officer Hugh Roberts declared that the strikes had been called off "as an act of good will".

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash cited "significant progress in the talks", before adding, "We have still not reached a final agreement and as a result we are putting on additional strike action next month."

Confirming that nothing had actually been agreed, TSSA leader Manuel Cortes said, "We are not out of the woods yet", but he hoped the talks would "result in a negotiated settlement".

LU management have not shifted their position. They continue to insist on a costed 24-hour operation and have refused to reverse the ticket office closure programme due to be completed in October. All they have done is defer the original date of implementing

24-hour tube service, September 12, and, crucially for the bureaucracy, promised to involve the unions at all levels.

Typically, Labour Party London Assembly transport spokeswoman Val Shawcross weighed in on behalf of business interests, insisting, "The mayor needs to be straight with Londoners if that date [September 12] is no longer viable, as further uncertainty could well mean businesses who are expecting the night Tube to be running for the Rugby World Cup are left out of pocket."

The Trades Union Congress (TUC), in the face of strike-breaking threats and further anti-strike laws they describe as "dictatorial", has refused to mobilise to defend LU workers. Instead they released a statement reiterating that the TUC always "encourages employers" to negotiate.

All the unions have made clear they are not opposed to night working, despite its impact on workers' health and the safe operation of trains. At present the LU network is non-operational for a number of hours during the night for maintenance, repairs and cleaning.

Since the LU strikes began, the trade unions, including their pseudo-left element, have opposed what they call the Conservatives' "politicisation" of the strikes. Steve Hedley, Socialist Party (SP) supporter and RMT assistant general secretary, for example, complained that the unions wanted negotiations without "political interference". The TSSA's Cortes demanded Mayor Boris Johnson stop "playing politics" with the Tube service. In this manner, the union officials disarm workers in the face of what is a directly political struggle against the government.

The SP, whose member John Reid is the RMT's executive rep for London Transport, acts as a propaganda outlet for the unions. When ASLEF pulled out of the strike, they described this act of treachery as merely "stepping back". The SP politely urged drivers

to respect picket lines to help create “the platform for further joint action with ASLEF”.

On August 19, the SP’s *Socialist* commented, “As we go to press” ahead of new strikes, “last-minute talks” could still lead to “management concessions”.

On August 11, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) conducted a brief and uncritical interview with ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan, who was allowed to present himself as a militant fighter. After ASLEF pulled out of strike action on August 18, the SWP wrote, “Unfortunately,” the next strikes would not include “Tube drivers’ union Aslef”.

These pseudo-left parties hailed the strikes when they began in early July. The Socialist Party called it “historic” because all four LU trade unions were involved. The SWP said it confirmed that “only the unions stand in the way” of Conservative government austerity.

These fake “left” forces know they are lying, but by acting as apologists for the betrayals carried out by the unions they hope to safeguard their often lucrative relations with the bureaucracy. The SP has a supporter and a member on the RMT executive who are paid handsomely for services rendered. More important still, the RMT backs and provides funds for the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), an electoral front led by the SP that constitutes the main area of its work and which insists that only the unions can create a new party to oppose the pro-business Labour Party.

The key lesson that emerges once again from the London Underground conflict is that any struggle to defend jobs, wages and conditions and democratic rights can only proceed independently of, and in opposition to, the trade unions. These are organisations that have long been integrated into the structures of corporate management, staffed by an upper-middle-class layer hostile to the most minimal efforts of workers to defend themselves.



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