Strike shuts down London Docklands Light Railway

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Workers at Docklands Light Railways (DLR) in London held a 48-hour strike last week, the first strike at the DLR to fully shut down its rail services since its inception in 1987. The strike began November 3 at 03:58 a.m., ending exactly two days later.

The work stoppage was called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, with members voting 92 percent ballot in favour. The dispute is with the current DLR franchise owner, KeolisAmey Docklands (KAD). The company inherited the franchise from Serco in December 2014, based on proposals of further cost-cutting.

The RMT and other rail unions did not mobilise workers across the London Transport authority, Transport for London (TfL). This allowed TfL management to deploy managerial and clerical staff as "ambassadors" to advise passengers on alternative routes to their destinations.

TfL management also ran extra bus services along the DLR network to minimise the impact of the strike. Nevertheless, the strike disrupted the whole DLR network from Lewisham to Poplar to Canary Wharf.

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash said, "Members on the DLR were furious at the way that KeolisAmey were trying to bulldoze in some of the worst working practices and conditions associated with the operations of the most cheapskate and anti-union companies in the transport sector."

KAD is making use of lower-paid contract workers to partly run the DLR metro, in order to undermine existing working conditions. Keolis is a global corporation running transportation networks in cities across the world.

In the UK, Keolis owns 35 percent of Govia, which operates the Govia Thameslink Railway, Southern, Southeastern and London Midland franchises and has a 45 percent shareholding in First TransPennine Express—delivering one-in-three rail journeys in the UK. Amey is one of the UK's leading public service providers.

Keolis has a history of slashing costs by sub-tendering jobs to its own contractors. In Boston, in the United States, for example, Keolis won a contract for commuter rail services by promising cost savings over the then-current operator. The current operator was a joint venture of which Keolis is a member.

The history of the DLR is one of a series of franchises run by various contractors with the collaboration of the trade unions, the RMT in particular.

The DLR is a subsidiary of TfL, whose head is Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson. Johnson advocates the full automation of the London Underground, in large part to prevent further strikes by London transport workers.

Last September, TfL attempted to impose the 24-hour running of night metro trains on the London Underground workers, as part of a bid to make the City of London trade continuously with Wall Street, the Shanghai Stock Exchange and Tokyo Nikkei stock markets.

The attempt was temporarily halted by tube workers, who held four one-day strikes between July and September. Some 20,000 tube workers were involved and the whole of the London transport network was paralysed. London workers expressed sympathy with the strikes, in light of the austerity and decline in living standards that have continued for the past seven years.

Although TfL is one commercial body, workers employed by it are divided by a myriad of subsidiaries and sub-contractors. All trade unions at TfL are "stakeholders" and in this way share in the exploitation of their own members. Since its beginnings, the DLR

always employed a multi-tiered workforce on different terms and conditions. KAD is entitled as per franchise agreement to employ contract workers on different terms and conditions than those currently employed. The franchise agreement is well known to all stakeholders, including the trade unions.

If kept under the control of the unions, the determination demonstrated by the workers in last week's strike will yield no positive results. There has been no announcement on the progress of ongoing negotiations.

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