

Subway, train and airline workers strike in the UK

Robert Stevens
11 January 2017

London was brought to a standstill Monday by a 24-hour strike of London Underground staff, employed on the capital's subway.

Up to 4,000 station and ticket staff, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) walked out at 6pm on Sunday. The workers struck in opposition to over 800 job losses, the closure of many safety-critical control rooms, displacement of staff, grading issues and the chaos and safety hazards brought about by the closure of hundreds of ticket offices.

Monday's tube strike was followed Tuesday with the start of a 48-hour stoppage by drivers at Southern Rail, run by the Govia Thameslink Railway franchise. The industrial action by around 1,000 Aslef union members and a small number of workers from the RMT brought Southern's scheduled services to a halt. Just 16 trains were able to run, compared to the usual timetabled 2,242 services. The Southern rail network is one of the most critical in the country, with many of its passengers commuting to London. A further 24-hour strike is scheduled for Friday.

Southern's workers are protesting the company's government-backed decision to impose Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains, first by eliminating the role of conductors in opening and closing doors and reducing their mandate to collecting fares. The move, endangering public safety, is aimed at the eventual elimination of conductors on the railways.

Also on Tuesday, 2,900 cabin staff employed by British Airways (BA) at Heathrow Airport began a 48-hour strike to demand a pay increase. The Unite union members are employed under the airline's "mixed fleet" low-pay system and receive starting pay of just over £12,000 a year--plus £3 an hour flying pay--a miserly amount deemed enough by BA to cover their expenses such as food.

The strikes have broken out in defiance of a relentless government-corporate onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions. More fundamentally, all three strikes are in opposition to the betrayal of previous struggles by the unions

and the Labour Party, which have allowed the employers to go on the offensive.

These strikes follow substantial mobilizations by tens of thousands of junior doctors and other substantial sections of the British working class last year.

As a result of Monday's strike by tube workers, many stations were forced to close, including some of the networks busiest in central London. No services ran from the key interchange stations including Victoria, King's Cross, Waterloo, Paddington, Euston, Bank and London Bridge. No service at all was available on the busy Victoria and Waterloo & City lines. According to the BBC, based on data obtained from Transport for London (TfL), 120 tube stations--out of 270--were closed by the strike.

The train driver union Aslef was not involved, so trains still were still running. TfL tried to play down the widespread impact of the action by claiming that services were still running but was forced to admit that only a limited service was available on 10 out of 11 Tube lines. As the BBC reported, 81 of the closed stations had trains running through them but not stopping.

Pavements throughout the capital were crowded with hundreds of people seeking alternative forms of transport, with many crowding onto buses. The 150 extra buses deployed by TfL had virtually no impact, with many journeys taking hours due to the increased traffic on roads. On Monday evening, hours after the strike ended, some stations remained closed.

At Holborn Underground station, speaking in the lead-up to the strike, Jean, a member of the station staff, said, "The strike is against job cuts, a consequence of the closure of the ticket offices. This has led to an increase in irate passengers and assaults on staff have significantly increased."

At another busy central London station, Alice, a customer service assistant said, "I have an impression that managers don't mind the strike as long as trains are running. But I hope it will be like the last time [four days of strikes last summer] when everything was shut down."

Explaining the intolerable conditions facing staff and the

unsafe situation at Underground stations following mass job losses and office closures, Alice said, “All stations now are barely staffed, if not at all. Look at this station, there are only three of us [staff] here now. It is a massive station, near a daily busy shopping area. If a fire or an incident happens, we don’t have enough people to safely evacuate passengers to safety.”

She continued, “Customers have become more angry in regards to ticketing. There are two lines and four platforms here and just three of us. This station sees 200,000 passengers a day on average.”

Tube management claims to have recruited 600 station staff but these are all part-time positions. Alice explained, “We are mostly part-time and work during either mornings or evenings.”

At Oxford Circus station, subway worker John said that staff had to carry out regular security checks. “We have a security round of 45 points to check at this station, one of the busiest on the network,” he explained. “It must be done hourly. But there are no extra staff so the concourse is left deserted and most platforms too. The human side of the job is gone. Passengers have their money taken by the company and are left to fend for themselves. This is especially bad for the elderly and the disabled and groups of school kids visiting London.”

The demands of the strikers come into conflict with the rotten role of the trade unions. On London Underground, for example, the unions collaborated in the closure of all 265 London Underground ticket offices--completed in December 2015--with the loss of more than 800 jobs.

Labour’s nominally “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn said not a word about the Underground strike Monday. So as to pose no threat to a weakened and crisis-ridden government, Corbyn calls on the Conservative government to take charge of resolving the dispute—this addressed to the very same party that has strengthened anti-strike legislation and is threatening to go further.

On Tuesday, Corbyn reiterated that “what I’m saying to the government is get together with those who travel on the trains, who work on the trains, to get a solution.”

Labour’s hostility to the Underground strike was openly declared by the party’s London Mayor Sadiq Khan. Khan stated, “I say to the trade unions I think you’ve made a big mistake today, it was unnecessary, let’s talk about the differences there still are.”

Speaking to Sky News, Khan said, “[T]here should be no strikes on our public transport if they can be avoided.” He boasted, “Since my election in May we’ve had 92 [percent] fewer days lost through strike action [in London] than under the previous mayor....” Khan warned, “I said I want zero hours of strike while I’m mayor and I still stand by that, I

want zero hours of strike going forward.”

This assertion--from Labour’s most senior national politician after Corbyn--chimes in with legislation to be enacted in March by the government that will effectively outlaw strikes in “important public services,” including transport.

Government figures and big business representatives denounced the strikes as damaging the drive to create a “globally competitive” UK economy, following last June’s referendum vote to leave the European Union.

Tim Loughton, Tory MP for East Worthing and Shoreham, and an advocate of even more repressive anti-strike laws said, “At a time when the Government is doing everything it can to show Britain is open for business post-Brexit, resurgence in union activity doesn’t help that message. We don’t want this to be seen as a back-door way for the unions to try and undermine Brexit.”

Colin Stanbridge, chief executive of the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said, “This is the wrong time to send out a message across the world that London isn’t open for business, as it is being closed by ongoing strikes... Strikes like this go to the very heart of undermining companies’ efforts to make a real success of Brexit.”

The strikes, which take place in context of the right-wing, nationalist hysteria whipped up around the UK’s vote to leave the European Union, make clear that despite the sharp move to the right by the British political establishment, there exists substantial opposition to the reactionary policies of the big business Labour and Tory parties in the British working class.

The rail union has done everything in their power to inject a parochial and nationalist orientation to the strikes, with the TSSA and Pro-Corbyn momentum organization producing and publicising a video presenting the populations of Europe as benefiting from the privatization of the British rail system.

In reality, the interests of British workers are the same as those of the whole of the European working class, which was mobilized in France last year in mass protests against a bill to gut labour protections, and in strikes at the German airlines Lufthansa and Eurowings.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact