

Tube workers' strike brings much of London to a halt

Peter Austin

9 November 2018

On Thursday, London Underground tube drivers ended a second round of strikes. Some 800,000 daily commuters were affected by the strike by Central Line drivers, who struck for 24 hours.

The Central Line was entirely shut, with the line fleet of 76 trains remaining in depots at Hainault, Leytonstone, West Ruislip and White City. Central Line stations serving the city and the Waterloo and City Line were closed. These carry about 100,000 passengers daily from the City on the north side of the Thames to the busiest main railway line in Europe, Waterloo station, on the south bank of the Thames.

The strike involved members of ASLEF and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT). Another strike scheduled for the same day from noon on the Piccadilly Line, serving Heathrow Airport, was cancelled at the last minute by the RMT.

The action was in defence of tube workers summarily sacked by management since September. It also involved accumulated grievances, including the failure to employ sufficient numbers of drivers and other staff.

The latest casualty is a 25-year veteran Central Line driver who had a pristine record until he succumbed to human error at work. He opened the saloon doors of his train, which was berthed in a tunnel section at Wanstead station, having bypassed safety circuits operated from the cab.

ASLEF London tube organiser Finn Brennan said, "Our member made a mistake while dealing with a problem caused by a defective train. While he did not carry out the correct procedure, he used his 25 years of experience to ensure no passengers were endangered during the incident. He accepted that he was wrong not to correctly apply the procedure and took full responsibility for his mistake. He was summarily dismissed, despite a quarter-century of dedicated professional service."

Sections of tube trains are now regularly in tunnels at

stations, compounding any mistakes made by employees. Management introduced the 1992 Central Line automated tube stock with the full knowledge that the trains were longer than some platforms. This was repeated on the Northern line, with the 1995 ATO stock, a year later with the 1996 Jubilee Line stock, and currently on the sub-surface lines with the S stock. The Hammersmith and City Line and the District Lines S stock trains, seven cars long, are up to 50 feet longer than platforms at stations such as Bayswater, Temple and Embankment.

On the Piccadilly Line in October, another two drivers were sacked by management for minor reasons. These cases are going through appeal at industrial tribunals.

The strikes express the deep anger of workers after a decade of budget cuts, productivity increases, reductions in real wages, longer work weeks of seven to eight days consecutively, plus an increase in working weekends agreed by the unions two years ago. Management are seeking to remove workers' grades in the next decade, when automation is introduced via Automatic Train Operations (ATO).

Workers also oppose a company disciplinary process skewed in favour of management, again imposed with the collaboration of the tube unions.

Despite the powerful impact of the strike on a single line, the unions ensured that the drivers were isolated from other tube and transport workers in the capital.

On October 5 and 6, 500 tube workers on the Central Line struck to protest unsafe working practises, including forced overtime. A week before, 400 drivers on the Piccadilly Line struck from September 26 to 29. The line was entirely shut and no trains moved during the first 48 hours.

Piccadilly Line drivers struck for several reasons, including management forcing driver victims of railway accidents to return to work too early. The standard six months recuperation period to which a driver is entitled

after a traumatic collision or accident on the track or at a station is being shortened.

October's Central Line strike was organised by the ASLEF trade union and none of the RMT drivers crossed picket lines. The Piccadilly Line strike ballot was organised by the RMT union, with all but a few ASLEF members refusing to cross picket lines at Cockfosters, Arnos Grove, Acton Town, Bollo House and Northfields depots.

In the face of this class solidarity, the unions ensured that all other tube lines ran as normal, undermining the industrial action.

Southwestern rail workers were on strike for 48 hours at the same time as Central Line workers, to protest the introduction of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains. Southwestern is just one of the many rail franchises seeking to impose DOO, threatening thousands of workers' jobs and public safety. The firm runs many services into London, and the strike led to the cancellation of 500 trains—indicating the potential impact of a united offensive by tube, rail and other transport workers.

Many workers complain that mistakes are being made as the result of sharp increases in productivity since 2011. One assessment found that productivity, compared with other metro systems, rose by 22 percent from 2009/2010 to 2014/2015. Daily performance is measured by regular round-the-clock snapshots, with a 96 percent fleet utilisation as the minimum to generate bonuses for management.

Last December, train managers' contracts were renegotiated with the RMT and ASLEF, alongside management union TSSA, with an emphasis on increasing the exploitation of tube workers by tightening the screws on performance parameters, including the number of SPADS (signals passed at danger), attendance record, errors made on the job and sickness.

Speaking to the WSWs, Steve, a worker on the Northern Line, said, "Cranking up performances leads to the removing, over time, the most costly contracts, namely the oldest drivers, irrespective of their mistakes."

Stephanie, a driver for eight years, noted that a number of drivers no longer even reach retirement age. She had noticed that "over the years I have seen the company geared to squeeze as much passenger-mileage from us as long as we possibly can give. Even the right to be on maternity leave is being challenged."

The unions have helped ensure that the company's productivity and de-staffing agenda is imposed. A worker who struck on the Piccadilly line said, "[O]ver the years,

to increase productivity, training and safety procedures were cut to the basic minimum with the collaboration of the unions."

Tube worker Ola said of the disciplinary process, "Very few drivers ever got their jobs or livelihoods saved by the unions, which helped skew the disciplinary process in favour of management. Most are shunted onto lower paid grades, with pay declining over three to five years after the outcome at their company trial."

In a statement on Wednesday's action, ASLEF warned management that it was struggling to contain tube workers' anger and pleaded for more talks in order to head off the prospect of joint industrial action by its members. ASLEF organiser Brennan commented that the union's "executive committee is to discuss resolutions from our branches on the Hammersmith & City and Northern lines asking to be balloted for action with other branches set to follow. Unless there is a rapid change of approach from management, working inside existing agreements instead of trying to circumvent or 'reinterpret' them, then the likelihood is there will be a combine-wide shut-down in the run-up to Christmas.

"Senior figures at TfL [Transport for London] need to realise just how serious the industrial relations problems on London Underground have become and start to deal with them. ASLEF does not want to be in a position where we are faced with dispute after dispute." The statement concluded: "ASLEF have repeatedly made it clear that we are available for talks with management, at ACAS or in any other forum. But London Underground have made no new proposals and seem completely uninterested in solving this dispute."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact