

UK government ties Transport for London bailout to “back to work” drive

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Labour’s Mayor Sadiq Khan has accepted a £1.1 billion grant and a £500 million loan for Transport for London (TfL), which is dependent on successfully implementing the Johnson government’s back-to-work agenda and imposing savage attacks on Tube, rail and bus workers.

TfL, which runs the London Underground network and the capital’s buses and rail services, was on the point of breaching statutory “minimum cash balances” it is required to hold. Its de facto bankruptcy would have gravely undermined the government’s efforts to stampede people back to work and restore corporate profits.

TfL lost 90 percent of its income from fares as millions of Londoners worked at home, eating through more than £1 billion of its reserves and facing a £4 billion black hole in its 2020–21 budget. This was despite furloughing 7,000 staff—25 percent of its workforce—to cut costs. Khan had told LBC radio, “We’ll have to start reducing services. The only way to balance the books is to cut services.”

Welcoming the emergency funding, London’s Transport Commissioner Mike Brown, said that TfL would “continue to do everything in our power to help deliver a successful recovery for our great city.”

While the incidence of COVID-19 in the capital, which has seen around 22 percent of the total number of UK deaths, is falling thanks to the lockdown, the return to work in the densely packed London Underground and buses threatens a vast increase in the number of deaths among both passengers, transport staff and their families.

The government has arrogantly urged people to walk, cycle or drive to work wherever possible, but these exhortations ignore the reality that millions and millions rely on public transport to get to work.

To date, 33 London bus drivers have already lost their lives as well as 10 London Underground workers under the reduced travel during the lockdown—thanks to TfL’s contempt for workers’ safety and failure to provide even the most basic personal protective equipment (PPE). The TfL’s response to the deaths of its workers has been criminal indifference, not even bothering to compile and publish the figures.

Transport officials have warned that the Tube can only run at about 15 percent capacity if it is to adhere strictly to the 2-metre social-distancing guidance, while a double decker bus could only carry 15 passengers and a single decker 5 to 7 passengers. But neither TfL, nor the government has any intention of abiding by such strictures.

Under these conditions, the government’s return to work order is nothing short of pre-meditated murder. It will eliminate anything positive achieved by the lockdown. All the hardships and sacrifices that working people have endured, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable, are to be thrown aside to enable big business to make a profit.

The Tories are seeking to implement their policy on the cheap while at the same time launching a frontal assault on TfL’s workforce.

The grant is just half of what TfL asked for and comes several years after the government terminated its already limited funding—leaving London the only capital city in western Europe without subsidy. The grant comes with onerous strings, none of which were attached to the far more generous rescue packages for the privatised passenger rail franchises that ensured them against any losses.

The government is to put two people on TfL’s board to increase its oversight and “review” TfL’s finances. It has demanded a sharp increase in fares, under

conditions where transport costs are already the highest in Europe, and for the cost of the bailout to be borne by “Londoners”—both of which will penalise the working class.

In return, TfL will have to guarantee the return of all transport services back to pre-pandemic levels. This is higher than the 75 percent level London mayor Khan was aiming for next week. It will also have to post adverts telling people to “Stay Alert”—the government’s new and controversial slogan that replaces its previous “Stay at Home” campaign.

None of these measures will address TfL’s financial black hole and its dependence on exorbitant fares for 47 percent of its income and 12 percent from London’s Congestion Charge, the new Ultra Low Emission Zone and commercial activities, as well as grants for Crossrail from central government and the Greater London Assembly.

With passenger numbers unlikely to reach previous levels due to the plummeting economy, the drop in tourism and travel and the inevitable re-eruption of the pandemic, massive cuts and austerity measures are on the agenda.

TfL’s workforce will face a relentless assault on their wages, speed-ups and the threat of job losses. Immediately there will be a clampdown on anyone forced to self-isolate, or who exercises their legal right not to work under unsafe conditions. A special demand was inserted stipulating that absences of staff from work have to be reported to the government, which will prove to be a charter for victimisation. Going forward, the government’s power to vet TfL’s finances will provide the whip for cut after cut and constant speed-ups. There is no doubt that eliminating the role of conductor and bringing in driver-only trains on London routes will be one of the first cost-cutting measures insisted upon.

Manuel Cortes, general secretary of the TSSA transport union, welcomed the cash injection for preventing services “coming to a halt.” Mick Whelan, general secretary of the train driver’s union Aslef, said, “It would have been a disaster for the capital, and the country, if the Tube network—and London buses—had stopped running.”

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) struck a left pose, issuing a statement warning of possible strike action in the event of any attacks on

“pay, jobs and conditions arising from this imposed settlement...”

“We will not accept one penny of austerity cuts imposed by Whitehall or passed on by City Hall as part of this funding package and our resistance will include strike action if necessary,” wrote General Secretary Mick Cash.

The RMT was seeking “an urgent meeting with both the Mayor and Secretary of State for Transport,” warning that “our resistance will include strike action if necessary.”

The RMT are past masters of such verbal posturing, as has been proved in the isolation and betrayal of numerous strikes across the rail network last year against Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains. But their left-rhetoric is in recognition of the anger among transport workers at the kick-in-the teeth delivered by the Tories and agreed by Khan, after so many weeks of working under dangerous conditions.

The worst mistake rail and bus workers can make is to place any confidence in the RMT and other transport unions to act in their defence. Drivers, conductors, station, garage and maintenance staff must act independently in defence of their safety and in opposing the onslaught being prepared on their livelihoods by Johnson, Khan and TfL management.

This cannot be left to the individual protest of withdrawing labour in unsafe conditions, as championed by the trade unions as an excuse for their own inaction. Rank and file organisations of class struggle must be formed, to unify the entire transport sector workforce and appeal for solidarity action from the working class throughout London, the UK and from transport workers throughout Europe facing the same threat to their lives and livelihoods.



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