

London Underground drivers return 99 percent strike vote against bailout plans, as RMT prepares to ballot members

Laura Tiernan
12 November 2021

Tube drivers across the London Underground rail network have delivered a resounding vote for industrial action against plans by the Johnson government and Transport for London (TfL) to slash pensions and working conditions.

Train drivers' union ASLEF asked tube drivers, "Are you prepared to take part in industrial action consisting of a strike?" 1,336 drivers voted yes—98.8 percent of those balloted—with just 16 voting no.

The Conservative government is demanding cuts of £509 million across the London Underground as part of "bailout" measures that will negatively impact thousands of staff and millions of passengers.

Under the terms of a bailout deal between Transport Secretary Grant Shapps and Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan signed in June, Transport for London committed to "efficiencies" of £1.8 billion across rail, bus and underground services over the next two years.

A review commissioned by Khan in July 2020 already established a shopping list of options including: a 25 percent increase in Zone 1 fares; continued suspension of the Freedom Pass during morning peak travel for the disabled and those aged 66+; abolition of the 60+ pass to save £156 million; and extension of the congestion charge to outer London raising £500 million each year.

Pension reform is a major target, with the bankers who led Khan's review of TfL finances concluding, "TfL's current pension model is expensive... The scheme is generous to employees when benchmarked against the Network Rail and Civil Service schemes, which have been reformed."

The Tory-Labour bailout insists that transport workers must foot the bill for decades of government

underfunding and a pandemic whose catastrophic outcome is the responsibility of Westminster and capitalist governments throughout the world. TfL workers are to be fleeced of their life savings, while the corporations and oligarchs who control the City of London have raked in trillions during the pandemic via state hand-outs, tax cuts and profiteering.

ASLEF described this week's strike vote as a "staggering mandate from our members". It threatened, "Management should be in no doubt that if they try to force through changes to our agreements, working conditions, or pensions, there will be hard-hitting and sustained industrial action across London Underground."

But no dates for industrial action have been announced by ASLEF, with a union spokesperson stating, "the ball is in TfL's court". ASLEF's response cedes the political initiative to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's criminal government and TfL, with General Secretary Mick Whelan declaring, "It's up to Boris Johnson to step up and do the right thing to help keep the capital moving—he was, once, Mayor of London, and should understand how the capital works".

ASLEF is under no illusion that the Johnson government will proceed with their slash and burn plans. In September, Whelan reported on the outcome of talks, confirming that TfL had been "clear about their plans to change working conditions. We were explicitly told that 'staying the same is not an option'. And a management bulletin sent out after the meeting told us that they intend to start, not with high paid managers but Train and Station staff."

The London Underground is set to become a major battle ground in the coming months. The rail unions are

positioning themselves as vociferous critics of the planned cuts, but are doing everything in their power to politically contain and divide workers' emerging opposition across the underground.

On Wednesday, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) announced it is preparing to ballot its members across TfL and the London Underground "for strike action and action short of strike action" against TfL's planned cuts, with RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch revealing, "management is now proceeding to consult us on cuts involving detrimental changes to pensions and conditions and involving a loss of jobs."

But the RMT's political commitments were made clear in Lynch's grovelling appeals to Sadiq Khan. Lynch portrayed the Labour Mayor as amenable to pressure declaring, "We call on the London Mayor to stop implementing government cuts and stand up for the working people of London."

Khan's "support for working people" was revealed less than 48 hours later when he attacked a strike announcement by RMT members against the unsafe re-launch of night services on the tube, declaiming, 'The unnecessary strike action threatened by RMT would delay many Londoners having another option to travel home safely at night and would hold our city back at a time when our culture and hospitality sectors have been devastated by the pandemic.'

A series of walkouts will take place November 26—December 18 affecting the Jubilee, Central, Piccadilly, Victoria and Northern lines with workers protesting dangerous conditions caused by the axing of dedicated Night Tube staff.

TfL's "independent review" of pensions—commissioned as part of the bailout agreement—will report its recommendations to the government in December, with a final report due in March 2022. TfL boss Andy Byford's claim that his review would have "no predetermined outcome" was a fraud and is belied by its stated aim of "moving TfL's Pension Fund into a financially sustainable position".

Byford appointed former Trades Union Congress (TUC) general secretary and current ACAS conciliation service president Brendan Barber to head TfL's pensions overhaul. His pick speaks to the complete reliance of the ruling class on its corporatist partnership with the TUC and affiliated unions. Barber is deliberating alongside Joanne Segars OBE, Chair of

NOW: Pensions, and chair of the Joint Expert Panel on the Universities Superannuation Scheme. Thousands of university and college lecturers are currently voting for strike action against the gutting of their pensions.

This week, the RMT confirmed, "Brendan Barber has written to our union making clear that options under consideration by his pension review include ending the final salary scheme and many other forms of detriment to the current arrangements." Tube drivers and other TfL workers stand to lose tens of thousands of pounds in life savings.

The RMT has declared that any attempt to close or reduce the scheme for its members will be met with strike action. But its fighting words must be judged against the RMT's record of facilitating government attacks on the London Underground and elsewhere.

As recently as March 2020, the RMT cancelled a ballot for industrial action across the London Underground against below-inflation pay offers from TfL. Senior RMT officials backed by the regional organiser accepted a four-year pay deal that would see a rise of just 2.7 percent in the first year, RPI +0.2 percent in the second year, RPI +0.2 percent increase in the third year, and RPI + 0.2 percent in 2023. The four year pay-deal was endorsed by the RMT's National Executive and mirrored strike ballot cancellations by Unite on the London buses.

No faith can be placed in ASLEF or the RMT to defend pensions and other benefits won in decades of struggle by the working class. While successive Tory and Labour governments have tolerated relatively higher pay rates for train drivers as the price for industrial peace, a frontal assault on pensions, pay and conditions is being readied. The fight of London Underground workers will unfold as part of broader offensive by the working class, posing the need for rank-and-file organisation and socialist leadership independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions and Labour Party.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)