

Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan prepares to enforce historic Tory assault on London transport

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Transport for London (TfL), chaired by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan, has submitted plans to force through £4 billion in cuts by Boris Johnson's Conservative government to bus, rail and London Underground services and infrastructure over the next two years.

The cuts are set to take effect on December 11, with the Tories refusing to provide emergency funding to cover a collapse of fare revenue during the pandemic.

TfL, London's transport authority, relies on passenger fares to fund a massive 72 percent of basic operating costs since the Cameron Tory government axed central government operating grants in 2015.

Johnson has seized on the pandemic to demand that TfL become financially "self-sufficient." His government speaks for a financial oligarchy whose herd immunity policy has resulted in more than 160,000 preventable deaths while overseeing trillions in handouts, contracts and subsidies to the banks, corporations and other financial parasites.

The unprecedented scale of the cuts being readied was made clear by TfL's Finance Committee in a paper released on November 24, which forecast:

- 18 percent reduction in London bus services, with 100 routes to be axed (a seventh of the network) and reduced frequency across 200 more (about one third of all additional routes).
- 9 percent service reduction across the London Underground with possible scenarios including permanent closure of the 115-year-old Bakerloo line or the Jubilee, Metropolitan or Hammersmith & City lines.
- Non-replacement of ageing train fleet (for example 50-year-old Bakerloo trains) with rolling stock renewal contracts cancelled.
- Scrapping of bus electrification with existing bus vehicles to be kept in service longer to reduce costs.
- No progress towards Vision Zero (safety), decarbonisation, improving air quality or active travel to support a shift towards more sustainable modes of transport.
- End of capital expenditure on disability access for transport passengers, with non-renewal of "step free" assets resulting in "more frequent failures of lifts and escalators".
- London's road assets to "remain in current degraded condition" with a "high risk of unplanned bridge and tunnel closures".
- Cancellation of TfL supply chain contracts impacting on 43,000 jobs in Derby, Falkirk, Bolton, Liverpool, Yorkshire, and Ballymena, Northern Ireland.
- The cuts are so deep that by TfL's own admission they will push London's transport system into a state of "Managed Decline". As council housing tenants know, this involves the deliberate rundown of public assets as a prelude to privatisation and looting by developers and speculators.

Working class Londoners will be hit hardest. Only 56 percent of

London's 8.9 million people has access to a car. TfL says its cuts will result in one million fewer daily bus and train journeys, and a 20 percent reduction in the number of jobs available within 50 minutes' travel. But the wider social costs are incalculable. London has the highest poverty rate in England, with 38 percent of children in poverty and one in five working families unable to meet their daily needs. While 59 percent of Londoners use the bus each week, TfL's own modelling shows the poorest and most vulnerable rely on buses the most. The least profitable routes will be axed.

Unions call for alliance with Labour and big business

TfL's cuts will generate mass opposition among transport workers and passengers. Workers are already demanding unified strikes on the London Underground to defeat the government's plans. But workers can only mount a successful struggle if they break free from the grip of the transport unions which are seeking to shackle workers to an alliance with Labour Party politicians, including useless appeals to Mayor Khan to refuse Johnson's cuts.

The agenda of transport unions ASLEF, the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, Unite and TSSA was on display last Wednesday at a rally held outside parliament under the banner "Save London's Transport". Unite London & Eastern regional secretary General Secretary Peter Kavanagh, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch and ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan issued cringeworthy praise for a line-up of Labour MPs. The empty affirmations of "solidarity" from Labour MPs John McDonnell, Louise Haigh, Sam Tarry and Elly Baker, Labour Assembly Member and the party's Transport Lead in the London Assembly, were issued safe in the knowledge that the unions will do all in their power to block a mass industrial and political fight by transport workers and their millions of supporters.

The unions' promotion of the Labour Party was damage control aimed at concealing Khan's role and his Labour-run London Assembly in enforcing the Johnson government's diktats. The whitewashing reached absurd levels at the rally with the RMT's Lynch declaring, "We've got a message today for Mayor Khan. He's got to decide which side he's on. Because when it comes down to it, there are only two sides in a struggle: you're either with the workers or you're against them."

More ludicrous still was Lynch's appeal to Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, "You either join with us or you stand on the sideline, there is no neutrals [sic] in this struggle".

Starmer has been in de facto coalition with the Tories for nearly two

years now, while Khan is an obedient servant of the City of London. Since the former Shadow Lord Chancellor became Mayor in 2016, he has enforced £1 billion in annual cuts at TfL, downgrading services across the network. During the pandemic, he signed emergency funding agreements with Transport Secretary Grant Shapps pledging swingeing cuts and a fire sale of public assets.

Khan is calling for £3 billion emergency funding over the next two years to meet a projected revenue shortfall and a longer-term funding model to end TfL's overwhelming reliance on passenger fare revenue. His fruitless appeals are directed to the sociopaths at 10 Downing Street. Khan chose the *Financial Times* to publish his written protest last month against the government's cuts. His op-ed cited warnings by "business groups, TfL and city hall" that TfL's funding crisis threatens "national economic recovery" and that deep cuts to services would jeopardise efforts to force Londoners back to their workplaces during a still raging pandemic.

Unite's Peter Kavanagh took up this theme with relish at Wednesday's rally, calling for "an almighty alliance between all interested parties and between politicians... and yes big business — because big business needs a properly funded public transport system." Kavanagh is a ruthless official who has a record of victimising workplace militants.

RMT "briefing paper"

The RMT has enjoyed an undeserving reputation as a "militant" union, but its briefing paper on TfL's funding crisis exposes it as a corporatist flunkey of Labour and big business. Its first paragraph offers the following naked apologia for Khan: "TfL's statutory status as a Local Authority binds it to operate a balanced budget, so it has had to model a programme of massive cuts to services to cover its budget shortfall." The RMT's depiction of Khan as the hapless victim of Johnson was echoed by Unite, TSSA, ASLEF and the Labour MPs at Wednesday's rally. It is absolution offered for Labour's role in enforcing government cuts. TfL's Finance Committee has already submitted proposals for savage inroads, declaring, "As a local authority for statutory financial purposes, we are obliged to prepare a budget that is balanced over both the short and medium term."

Under the heading, "London is uniting against the cuts", the RMT's briefing paper outlines its strategy to fight Johnson. Transport workers may be surprised to learn that their "allies" in this fight are the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), business lobby group London First and a global coalition of city mayors led by Khan.

Transport workers must reject these efforts at chaining their struggle to the corporate and financial boardrooms. Unsurprisingly, the RMT offers scant evidence of "support" from big business, and the morsel held out turns on closer inspection to dust. For instance, the RMT cites an October 20 statement by the LCCI, claiming it shows that "businesses want to see the return of consistent central government financial support". But the LCCI's statement merely called for "a month-long emergency funding package with no conditions", stating that a "Longer-term funding discussion should be the point at which substantial changes, such as Congestion Charge expansion or reform, or fare increases, are considered."

RMT's promotion of London First is equally obscene. London First's corporate members include Barings, Natwest and Lloyds Bank, professional services firms including KPMG and PwC, property developers including Jones Lang La Salle, LendLease and LandSec, and transport giants such as Abellio, FirstGroup, Stagecoach and Uber.

Finally, the RMT promotes the C40 network of global mayors and their call for "national governments to collectively double public transport

journeys in cities by 2030 and advance a just transition to zero-emissions public transport... This includes moving away from emergency bailouts to stimulus packages."

Members of C40 include San Francisco Mayor London Breed, who is overseeing cuts of \$653.2 million over the next two years. It also includes Eduardo da Costa Paes, Mayor of Rio De Janeiro, the first mayor in Brazil to end mandatory mask-wearing, championing President Jair Bolsonaro's herd immunity policies that have killed more than 616,000 Brazilians.

The way forward

No faith can be placed in the tub-thumping rhetoric of RMT, ASLEF, Unite and TSSA and their pledges of joint industrial action to fight the Tories. Similar strike threats were issued over part-privatisation of the London Underground network in 1999-2001. Instead, the RMT presided over partial strikes that were eventually called off by its then General Secretary Bob Crow, ensuring the Blair Labour government's Public Private Partnership initiative could proceed with RMT's direct involvement.

The Johnson government's plans, enforced by Khan, are an indictment of capitalism. A city that once boasted the world's first modern sewage system (1865), its first underground railway system (1863) and such marvels of civil engineering as Tower Bridge (1894), offers in 2021 the vista of a "managed decline" of its entire rail, underground and road transport infrastructure, complete with "failure" of key assets, including escalators, roads, tunnels and bridges.

Meanwhile, the *Times* reports on "Young billionaires keen to spend pandemic profits on London property". Tech and cryptocurrency entrepreneurs, it informs, are among a new breed of speculators making their mark in the capital, "sales of luxuries such as yachts, private jets and art have all increased. As international travel opens up it appears they want to add properties to the portfolio."

The new rich list entrants are eschewing trophy homes, the newspaper explains, in favour of "fixer-uppers", valued at a mere £10 million. "Big hitters" are still active though, with recent sales including £210 million for 2-8 Rutland Place, £145 million for 1 Grosvenor Square, and a £170 million asking price for the Chelsea home of Formula One heiress Petra Ecclestone. UK billionaires increased their wealth by more than £16.5 billion during the first year of the pandemic, while globally their personal fortunes rose by 54 percent from \$US 8.4 trillion to \$US 12.39 trillion.

Claims by Tory and Labour governments that there is "no money" to fund high quality and affordable public transport are a lie. A successful fight against the Johnson government's cuts means a frontal assault on the domination of the financial oligarchy and all its political defenders. The Socialist Equality Party urges transport workers to break the grip of the corporatist trade unions and their big business allies in the Labour Party and establish rank-and-file committees of struggle.

Such committees can win mass popular support in the UK and internationally by fighting for socialist policies. The demand must be raised for the expropriation of the banks and corporations and their transformation into publicly owned assets, under the democratic control of the working class, freeing up resources to meet essential social needs.



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