

Rolling strikes on London Underground against ditching of dedicated Night Tube drivers

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6 December 2021

Strikes continued on the London Underground this weekend, with drivers taking action against the scrapping of dedicated drivers on the Night Tube service.

Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union struck Friday and Saturday nights for a total of eight hours, affecting Night Tube services on the Central and Victoria lines. The previous weekend saw 24-hour walkouts on the Piccadilly, Jubilee, Victoria, Central and Northern lines.

The Night Tube service was suspended at the start of the pandemic and resumed a fortnight ago as part of broader efforts to reopen the economy in the lead-up to Christmas, amid an escalating pandemic.

Transport for London (TfL) used the lengthy pause of service to scrap an agreement reached with rail unions in 2016 when the Night Tube was first established. That agreement established a dedicated grade of Night Tube drivers so that “No existing Train Operators will... need to work the Night Tube shifts unless they choose to do so.”

All tube drivers will now be forced to work at least four weekend Night Tube shifts per year. The RMT reports that on the Central and Victoria lines there is already a “huge increase” in weekend working and in drivers rostered to work Fridays.

In addition to destroying work-life balance, the axing of the dedicated Night Tube grade will see a dangerous increase in driver fatigue. The combination of existing shift patterns and Night Tube duties will see drivers working late and overnight shifts in the same week, before changing to a completely new shift pattern the following week.

According to the RMT, the axing of the Night Tube grade has not even been risk-assessed by TfL. Prior to the pandemic, the service was used by more than 8.7 million passengers, reflecting the growth in night-time workers

and the gig economy.

The elimination of dedicated Night Tube drivers was agreed by drivers’ union ASLEF, which represents the majority of drivers on the London Underground and most rail drivers nationally. The RMT balloted its own members on the issue, who returned an overwhelming mandate for strike action. But there is no doubt the introduction of compulsory Night Tube shifts is opposed by the vast majority of drivers in both unions.

TfL’s provocative actions on the Night Tube are part of a broader offensive against transport workers. Emergency funding agreements with the Johnson government during the pandemic have seen Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and TfL agree savage cuts across London’s transport network.

Workers face a political fight not only against the Johnson government, but against its political servants in the Labour Party. Mayor Khan and the TfL board have submitted plans to force through more than £1.3 billion in cuts, with tube budgets to be slashed by 9 percent, pushing London’s transport network into a state of “managed decline”.

Labour and the Tories agree the working class must repay the trillions in bailout funds handed to big business. TfL suffered a 95 percent fall in passenger revenue at the start of the pandemic. It relies on fares to fund a staggering 72 percent of its operating costs.

Mayor Khan has denounced the tube drivers’ action. He told reporters, “This needless strike action will hit London’s retail, culture and hospitality at the worst possible time as people visit the shops for Black Friday and start enjoying the Christmas festivities.”

Outrageously, Khan also accused RMT members of jeopardising “safety for women and girls making their way home at night”—this from a Mayor who is busy gutting transport services across the capital, leaving parts

of London without a functioning bus route! Scrapping the night grade will hugely increase the risk of accidents caused by driver fatigue, while safety on the tube calls for a massive expansion of staffing levels that have been systematically eroded.

Khan's attacks on the RMT's partial strikes make clear he will deploy the full force of the law against the eruption of mass strikes and protests targeting impending Tory-Labour austerity measures.

The RMT, ASLEF, Unite and TSSA are balloting their members for industrial action against the Johnson government's bailout cuts. But they've not even been able to organise united strikes against attacks on the Night Tube. This is because they are corporatist organisations, beholden to the Labour Party and big business.

As reported by the WSWS, last week's rally against bailout cuts saw the RMT and other rail unions advocate a political alliance with the Labour Party and the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch made the following cringeworthy appeal, "We've got a message today for Mayor Khan. He's got to decide which side he's on."

Workers cannot go into battle with organisations beholden to Sir Keir Starmer and Sadiq Khan.

To defeat TfL's plans, London Underground workers must organise rank-and-file committees, independent of ASLEF and the RMT, uniting all workers in a joint offensive. Strikes against the unsafe resumption of Night Tube services must be joined by an industrial and political campaign uniting bus, rail and underground workers to defeat the Johnson government's historic assault on London's passenger transport system.

Such a fight, reaching out to NHS workers, warehouse and logistics workers, and other sections of the working class, have the potential to win mass support from workers across Europe who are coming into struggle against the same slash-and-burn agenda of cuts and mass austerity being demanded by capitalist governments worldwide.



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