

# RMT union suppresses action by London Underground workers as Johnson government in meltdown

Laura Tiernan  
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Workers on the London Underground have voted overwhelmingly for industrial action against swingeing cuts being prepared by the Johnson government, Transport for London (TfL) and Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan. But the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) is working with ASLEF, Unite and other rail unions to head off a coordinated fightback by transport workers against the government's slash-and-burn proposals.

Fully 94 percent of RMT members voted "yes" for strike action during a four-week ballot that closed on January 10. The union balloted 10,000 members, with a 52 percent turnout. In November, ASLEF train drivers on the London Underground returned a 99 percent strike vote against the same planned attacks on pay, conditions and pensions.

London Underground faces cuts of £509 million. Around 600 jobs are targeted for destruction initially, mainly among station and ticketing staff, according to TfL bosses who briefed unions last month. Overall, TfL has a £2 billion annual shortfall due to the deep cuts to central government grants since 2014. The scale of de-funding over the next two years may push the city's public transport system, including roads and bridges, into "managed decline", according to TfL finance chiefs.

In December, a short-term funding agreement was reached by Khan and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps. It expires on February 4, with the Johnson government refusing to say whether new "bail-out" funds will be on offer. They are deliberately forcing TfL into crisis, slow-roasting London's entire transport system, with Khan and his feckless minions scrambling below.

TfL relies on passenger revenue to cover two-thirds of its operating costs, compared to France, Spain and even New York which receive around two-thirds of their funding from government. Successive Conservative governments have pushed TfL to become "self-reliant", a free-market directive dutifully embraced by Labour's Khan who has slashed £1 billion from the transport authority's budget since he became mayor in 2016.

The pandemic pushed TfL over the edge. Fares collapsed by 95 percent at the start of the pandemic and passenger levels have not yet fully recovered. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Shapps have seized on the funding crisis to force through a Thatcherite wish-list of asset sales, privatisation and attacks on transport workers. Property developers, investors and other financial parasites are the key beneficiaries.

The Tories regard train drivers' pensions, for example, as ridiculously inflated and are insisting they be gutted, along with pay-rates and terms and conditions won in decades of struggle. Khan is complying with Johnson's marching orders, commissioning a review last year by bankers which found that TfL pensions were "outdated" and "expensive".

Despite being given a clear mandate to defeat the government's brutal assault, ASLEF, the RMT and TSSA (which represents salaried staff) are suppressing their members' call for action and trying to channel this huge social force behind the Labour Party. At a protest by rail unions in December, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch issued grovelling appeals to Khan to "join the side of workers", while Labour MPs were praised for their imaginary "support" for workers

in struggle.

The Johnson government, beset by crisis, would be incapable of enforcing a single cut without Khan's and Labour's active participation. The Labour Party's real attitude to "workers in struggle" was on display at the start of the Night Tube strikes, which Khan and other Labour politicians denounced.

On January 14, RMT officials trumpeted the ballot results, "It's a YES from us! Drivers vote to strike to defend pay, pensions and agreements!" The RMT's newsletter declared, "Now that we have a ballot mandate, we can fight back against any attacks, and remind management that without us, not a wheel will turn."

Five days later, Lynch issued a letter to members explaining, "the National Executive Committee has considered this matter and taken the decision to call industrial action as detailed below." Their sole recommendation was that from February 2, "all members are instructed as follows: Not to familiarise staff who do not usually work at a location; No training of staff for roles that are outside of their normal substantive role; No undertaking of training that is outside of a member's normal substantive role."

No further measures were proposed. Lynch simply closed his letter with an empty promise that the RMT National Executive Committee would be "considering options for further action" if "commitments [from TfL] are not forthcoming."

Likewise, ASLEF has said it will honour the strike mandate delivered by thousands of tube drivers only "if [TfL] try to force through changes to our agreements". But London Underground bosses have already done so, with ASLEF's blessing. They scrapped a 2016 agreement on the Night Tube service, axing the dedicated night crew and forcing all train operators to work night shifts on top of their existing duties.

The RMT's response could not be clearer. With Boris Johnson's premiership hanging by a thread amid the deepest political crisis since the 1930s, the RMT has thrown the Tories a lifeline. The RMT's refusal to call all-out industrial action to defeat the government's "bailout" plans and remove the Tories from office is politically criminal, especially amid the growing clamour for war against Russia. It confirms the RMT's slavish adherence to the Trades Union Congress and its affiliated unions who have worked throughout the

pandemic to enforce Johnson's herd immunity agenda on behalf of business, forcing workers into unsafe workplaces to "keep the economy moving", a policy that has claimed more than 170,000 lives.

Notwithstanding its promotion as a militant union by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and the Stalinist *Morning Star*, the RMT is an industrial police force against workers. Where disputes *do* break out, the RMT isolates them before calling them off as soon as possible. As such, the current Night Tube fight is being confined to just two tube lines, while a strike by RMT members at Neasden depot over scheduling, due to start on January 20, was called off.

London Underground workers can place no faith in the RMT, ASLEF and other corporatist trade unions which work as loyal partners of the Johnson government and the employers. Nationally, rail unions are participating in the Rail Industry Recovery Group established by Johnson to slash costs across Network Rail and train operating companies that were temporarily brought back under government control during the pandemic to bail-out private operators.

Transport workers' willingness to fight is not in doubt. The struggle must be taken out of the hands of the rail unions and directed by workers through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees at every station, depot and maintenance yard. Through such committees, workers can formulate key demands and turn out to win support among bus, rail and other transport workers. Such a fight will win the enthusiastic backing of workers everywhere who are facing the ongoing social and economic costs of a global pandemic that must be ended.



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