

As Tube strikes throw London into chaos, Labour and Tory MPs denounce RMT as “Putin stooges”

Laura Tiernan and reporters

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A political witch-hunt has been unleashed against striking railworkers on the London Underground, with Conservative and Labour MPs and media outlets denouncing the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) as “Putin apologists” and “the enemy underground”.

Their denunciations come as thousands of Tube workers launched strikes on Tuesday and Thursday, bringing much of London to a standstill.

Around 10,000 station staff, drivers, and track and signal crew are striking in defence of jobs, conditions and pensions. They are fighting £400 million in cuts dictated by the Johnson government and enforced by Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan.

The McCarthyite witch-hunt against the RMT was launched on Wednesday with an article in the *Telegraph* headlined, “The enemy underground: how ‘Putin apologists’ brought London to a standstill”.

Written by Associate Editor Gordon Rayner, the article began, “Workers trudging miles through the rain because of Tuesday’s Tube strike in London would have felt that their troubles were as nothing compared with the horrors unfolding in Ukraine.

“Nor would they have been searching for any connection between the industrial action called by the RMT union and Vladimir Putin’s blood-soaked invasion of a sovereign country.”

Yet according to Rayner, such a connection exists: “the RMT, and particularly its assistant general secretary Eddie Dempsey, have long-standing sympathies for the pro-Putin separatists who have been fighting government forces in the east of the country for almost a decade.”

The *Telegraph*’s lurid allegations, with their implication that tube workers are Putin’s “useful idiots”, are a vicious libel against the strikers. They are part of efforts to brand all industrial action as treason in time of war.

The newspaper dredged up Dempsey’s meeting with Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine and his public support for the Solidarity with the Anti-fascist Resistance in Ukraine (SARU). But Dempsey’s real crime, the *Telegraph* makes clear, is his opposition to NATO’s “aggressive posturing” and war-mongering.

Rayner writes, “Dempsey is one of the most high-profile signatories to a Stop the War Coalition statement last week that criticised Nato”. The February 18 letter, Rayner explains, “caused a huge row within the Labour Party because 11 of its MPs had

originally signed the statement, all of whom withdrew their support for it on the orders of Sir Keir Starmer.”

Diane Abbott, John McDonnell and other MPs from the misnamed Socialist Campaign Group who withdrew their names from Stop the War Coalition’s letter are not simply political cowards. Their support for Labour’s war-hawks is paving the way for state repression against all genuine opponents of war and austerity.

The *Telegraph*’s diatribe against Dempsey and the RMT echoes word for word the accusations levelled by Starmer and other leading Blairites against the STWC. Rayner explains, “A Labour frontbencher described the Stop the War Coalition as ‘fifth columnists’ and ‘Putin apologists’.”

Rayner’s attack in the *Telegraph* was evidently coordinated with the Labour Party. He quotes Labour’s Chris Bryant, a member of the Commons foreign affairs committee, who denounces Dempsey’s “reckless naivety” and warns that those with “the best intentions and the warmest hearts can be the most dangerous people in the room”.

Labour’s role as an attack dog against this week’s strike exposes the bankruptcy of the RMT’s fawning appeals to Mayor Khan that he oppose the Johnson government’s cuts. Labour and the Tories are working together as one.

The designation of the RMT and tube workers as “the enemy underground”—the *Telegraph*’s URL includes this phrase—is a direct reference to Thatcher’s description of the miners as “the enemy within” during the 1984-85 strike. It was used to justify mass arrests, jailings and state violence against pickets.

The *Telegraph*’s McCarthyite attack on the RMT was joined by the *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Mail*, with the latter citing Tory MP Andrew Bridgen, “At a time of national emergency as we emerge from Covid-19 and face worldwide security issues, the tube strike is extremely damaging and self-indulgent.

“The strikers should remember how much taxpayers’ money has been pumped into keeping the underground running during the recent pandemic.”

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps tweeted: “For the 2nd time this week, tube strikes have brought London to a standstill. Given the government has provided almost £5bn to protect services & TfL jobs throughout the pandemic, this is no way to repay hard-pressed taxpayers who are simply trying to get to work & home.”

Transport workers in London are facing an historic assault on their jobs, conditions and pensions, with services being gutted. The Johnson government declares there is “no money” for transport services on which millions of people depend but has handed billions of pounds in subsidies to the rail and bus companies throughout the pandemic. It is funneling billions more into a war against Russia that threatens to drag the international working class into World War III.

The denunciations of the RMT as Putin’s stooges and of strikers as a threat to the “national interest” reveals that imperialist war abroad is accompanied by stepped class war, austerity and the destruction of democratic rights at home.

London transport workers speak out

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with London Underground workers and other Transport for London (TfL) workers during Tuesday’s and Thursday’s tube strikes.

Jane, a station supervisor who has worked on the London Underground for 22 years, spoke about the background to this week’s action. “TfL has not received any central government funding since 2015, and this does not happen anywhere on any other major transport system [in the world].

“Everybody else receives some form of state funding, so we have had to rely completely on fares, revenue from advertising and shops. Often cuts were made from the front line. Our ticket offices were closed to save money, replacing things with automation rather than with customer service.

“Underground staff, like all TfL staff, became classified as essential workers during the COVID pandemic, which meant that all face-to-face jobs had to carry on working. Buses and the tube ran about 90 percent of services.”

London transport workers were being repaid with massive cutbacks. “The government gave really short-term funding deals [to TfL] with strings attached, which includes huge savings being made from staff cuts, not filling vacancies and an increase in lone working.

“They have attacked our pensions by putting them under review. This was one of the conditions the government demanded as part of the [emergency] funding: that they review our pensions to reduce costs. Our pension is part of our working conditions. Our pensions are in a very healthy state, so I see this as an ideological attack.

“Today is an all-grade strike from members across the RMT. We have all united in fighting back, because in solidarity with UCU [University and College Union] workers and all other workers taking strike action, none of us deserves to pay for a crisis we did not make.”

Proposed job cuts of 500-600 would “mainly affect station staff in the first instance, saving about £25 million, but then beyond that there’s another £375 million to cut. But obviously if there is fewer staff since the last time jobs were cut on stations that means staff end up working more extreme shifts and working alone. Obviously

staff get more and more tired.”

Asked what she thought about the claim that there is no money to fund the Underground service when billions were handed out to the rich during the pandemic, she said “the idea that there is no wealth or nobody made any money during the pandemic is just not true, the fact is public services are essential to all of us.

“We lost a lot of bus drivers to COVID. That was a massive scandal. They were people just doing their ordinary jobs in order to survive. As with across society, people have suffered devastation from COVID.

“Things need to be funded and anybody who is not getting the cost-of-living pay rise right now is falling backwards.”

An Arriva London bus driver at the Stratford transport hub told our reporters, “I fully support the Underground workers strike. They are striking for their pay, conditions and pension. All TfL workers should come out in solidarity with them.”

A Tower bus driver, who had been a part of a struggle against similar attacks on him and his colleagues, said, “Thanks for explaining the issues in the strike. I have read about it but did not know the details. I support the Underground strikes. They are within their rights to strike to protect jobs and their pensions. All TfL workers are affected by the cuts to the London Transport budget. I believe the only way forward is a TfL strike. That is what is needed.”

Another bus driver commented, “I am in full support of the London Underground strikes. They have to strike to defend their pensions. It is important we are in solidarity. When we had our dispute with our pensions, many drivers took the money and now they must work longer than their retirement age. So yes, we TfL workers should be in solidarity to fight these cuts.”

At the Poplar Docklands Light Railway depot, a rail-worker said, “I am fully supporting the strike. As far as I have read, they are striking over jobs, pensions and working hours and cutbacks, because there is not a lot of staff now. I think they should get more staff, more pay and pension.

“We are not facing the same issue but who knows what is coming. They seem to be coming after everyone. It’s happening to the Underground, but everyone is under attack, and we have to make a stand together or they will just play with us.

“You will have a meeting then agree and management just go against it. That is what has been happening. What is coming up now is the age for a pension is going up. You will be dead before you can get it. We have to stand together, it is important.”



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