

For united strike action by London Underground, bus and rail workers to defeat Tory-Labour cuts! Money for transport and essential services, not war!

Socialist Equality Party (UK)

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This month's strikes on the London Underground showed the social power of the working class, bringing much of London to a standstill. London tube workers are fighting £400 million in cuts to jobs, conditions and pensions, with services on which millions depend facing decimation.

Just two days of strikes on March 1 and 3 by station staff, drivers, track and signal crews from the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) suspended services across the network with passenger numbers plunging by more than 95 percent. The strikes evoked widespread sympathy, including from drivers covered by the ASLEF union and tens of thousands of London bus drivers, rail, DLR and ferry crews.

Commuters hit with a new round of fare increases on March 2 have common cause with transport workers. London has one of the most unaffordable transport systems in the world and the latest 4.8 percent rise will hit the poor hardest. On the week of the strike, bus and rail workers left messages on social media supporting their colleagues' stand and demanding joint action to fight the deepest cuts to transport services in the city's history.

The Conservative government has seized on Transport for London's (TfL) financial crisis, triggered by a collapse in fare revenue during the pandemic, to force through savage cuts and privatisation. Its emergency "bailout" packages are an exercise in Thatcherite economics, used to extract further "efficiencies". Since 2015, central government grants to TfL have been slashed, making TfL reliant on passenger revenue to meet operating costs. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps gives billions in handouts to private rail and bus companies, while demanding London's transport authority be made fully "self-reliant".

On the London Underground, 600 job cuts have already started among station staff, while a review of pensions commissioned by Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan aims to slash £100 million a year from the scheme, ending any prospect of a secure retirement for tube drivers.

Last December, the RMT's Mick Lynch, ASLEF's Mick Whelan and Unite's Peter Kavanagh pledged joint strikes to defeat the government's cuts. But, true to form, the unions are colluding to block any fight. ASLEF, which represents most tube drivers, did not even formally join this month's two-day strike despite a 99 percent vote by its members. TSSA has not balloted office staff. Unite's refusal to organise London-wide balloting of its 20,000+ bus drivers and ferry workers will surprise no-one.

War footing

Transport workers' struggles unfold amid a global pandemic and war in Ukraine that have transformed class relations in every country. That is why the Johnson government and the press responded with hysterical denunciations to the tube strike. The *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Evening Standard* launched a witch-hunt denouncing RMT members as "Putin's stooges" and "the enemy underground", reviving Margaret Thatcher's designation of the British miners as "the enemy within".

Overnight, transport workers have gone from "frontline heroes" to ungrateful traitors "holding the capital to ransom". More than 103 TfL workers lost their lives to COVID-19 during the past two years. Having sacrificed their safety to keep London moving, they are now being forced to foot the bill for the trillions in bailout funds pumped into financial markets and to pay for an arms race against Russia and China that threatens World War III.

War abroad means a war against the working class at home. On the same week as the tube strikes, the *Financial Times* declared that British participation in NATO's war against Russia would mean "economic pain", while *Sunday Telegraph* editor Allister Heath declared that NATO expansion would

mean “large spending cuts” to the National Health Service, social care, pensions and “other numerous wasteful subsidies”.

At times of war, the ruling class looks strong as it concentrates all its economic, social and ideological resources against a foreign threat. But the need for war arises out of profound weakness, above all from rising class conflict at home, rooted in a malignant growth of social inequality that has reached breaking point. The working class wants to fight but is saddled with organisations that oppose the necessary struggle against financial and corporate interests and the state.

Private property

The RMT, ASLEF, TSSA and Unite focus their useless appeals on Mayor Khan, urging him to take a stand against the Tory government. Khan looks wistfully to Johnson, hoping for a reprieve while instructing his own financial executives and bankers to draw up the required cuts.

Nationally, the Tories are following the same playbook, readying billions in cuts via the Rail Industry Recovery Group the government created in December 2020, and which was joined by the rail unions which are helping to prepare cuts.

Johnson, Khan and Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer all claim that “sacrifice” and “pain” are necessary because there is “no money” for transport and other essential services. But their wartime measures against the property of Russian oligarchs is instructive. Overnight, mansions, super yachts, football clubs and other assets have been seized. Why stop there? Russia has no monopoly on oligarchs.

Last year, *Forbes* reported 56 UK billionaires had increased their wealth by £46.5 billion over the previous year and were worth an estimated £163 billion. Britain’s “top 10” oligarchs, James Ratcliffe, the Hinduja brothers, Michael Platt, James Dyson, Ian and Richard Livingstone, Anthony Bamford and family, David and Simon Reuben, Denise Coates and Christopher Hohn, have a combined wealth of £76 billion—enough to fund the modernisation of London transport over the next decade, including affordable fares and improved wages and conditions for the entire workforce.

Britain’s defence spending is another massive drain on social resources. Last year, the UK’s defence budget was £162 billion according to a report from the International Institute for Strategic Studies. The UK has overtaken India to become the third-largest defence spender in the world, after the United States and China, with the Johnson government announcing £16.5 billion extra for the military’s budget over the next four years. This money is needed urgently by the NHS and to end homelessness and poverty.

Build rank-and-file committees

The unions are tied to the corporations, the Labour Party and the Tory government by a thousand threads. To defeat the Johnson government’s agenda, workers must establish complete political independence from Khan and the pro-capitalist trade unions and draw up a strategy to win. The needs of the working class must take priority over those of the London stock exchange and financial oligarchy!

Rank-and-file committees must be elected at every workplace, led by trusted colleagues, to formulate workers’ key demands and organise united action for their realisation. Demands should include:

- Reject all cuts! Boycott all negotiations aimed at their enforcement, including participation in the Johnson government’s Rail Industry Recovery Group!
- Hands off workers’ pensions! All transport workers to receive a guaranteed living income on retirement.
- No fare increases! Fares must be made affordable as public transport is a basic human right.
- The pandemic is not over! COVID-19 protections for all TfL workers and passengers must be mandatory, including face masks, transparent reporting of workplace infections, effective track-and-trace, and full pay for all workers sick or self-isolating.
- A wage rise for all London transport workers of 25 percent to compensate for decades of pay suppression and rampant inflation.

To win their fight, rank-and-file committees will need to forge links beyond transport, to workers in the NHS, warehouse and logistics, telecommunications and other sectors across the UK, Europe and internationally. This fight requires a new revolutionary leadership in the working class. We urge transport workers who agree, to contact the Socialist Equality Party and provide their feedback. All information will be treated in confidence.



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