

UK: 24-hour London tube strike as rail unions sabotage genuine fightback

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4,000 station and revenue staff on the London Underground struck on Monday for 24 hours. They are fighting plans to axe 600 jobs, decimate pensions and slash terms and conditions.

The strike by members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) began at one minute past midnight, with service across much of the network ground to a halt. Service disruption is expected to continue into Tuesday morning.

Cuts to staffing and pensions are part of a scorched-earth policy against London's transport system by Labour Party Mayor Sadiq Khan and the Conservative government. Khan has drawn up plans for £400 million worth of cuts across Transport for London (TfL) this year alone.

Up to 600 jobs will go on the London Underground, with TfL refusing to replace staff who leave. At Victoria Station for example, 91 full-time Customer Service Assistants will be reduced to just 64. Less than a decade ago, 950 station jobs were axed as part of TfL's "Fit for the Future" programme.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has seized on the collapse of fare revenue during the pandemic to demand sweeping pro-market reforms. Cuts to central government grants mean that TfL has an annual funding shortfall of £2 billion. Like a mafia shakedown, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps is using "bail-out" packages to force through savage cuts.

Daniel Randall, picketing with colleagues at Oxford Circus, told the BBC, "As frontline station staff, the role we play in terms of accessibility, in terms of safety, is vital and the tube is going to be a worse place to travel on with 600 fewer staff on stations."

The RMT tried to talk up today's action, claiming Monday morning, "Trains have remained in depots across the network and RMT activists are reporting

huge attendances at picket lines despite heavy rain across the capital."

But the RMT's press statement was evasive. By confining the strike to revenue and station grades, the RMT guaranteed its impact would be limited. Service was fully halted only on the Circle, Victoria, Waterloo and City lines. A reduced "special service" operated on Bakerloo, Central, District, Hammersmith & City, Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly lines, with services "part suspended" on the London Overground.

According to TfL, 170 stations remained open as of midday, out of a possible 272. It reported "good service" on the Metropolitan and on the new Elizabeth line, while DLR, Tram and London bus network services were fully operational.

After the government's "bail-out" measures were announced last year, the RMT, ASLEF, Unite and TSSA rail unions pledged there would be "a historic campaign of united industrial action to defeat the Tories' cuts".

Thousands of train drivers covered by ASLEF returned a 99 percent strike vote on the London Underground last November. In January, RMT members, including drivers, platform and station grades, track maintenance and signalling workers returned a 94 percent strike vote.

Despite an ironclad mandate, not a single joint strike has been organised. Instead, the RMT and ASLEF have worked to divide their members and suppress the growing demands for unity. ASLEF allowed November's strike mandate to quietly expire last month, while for six months the RMT issued no public call to ASLEF members for a combined offensive to defeat TfL's cuts.

The unions' role in suppressing strike action has given Khan and TfL a free hand to proceed with their

plans. Former Trades Union Congress General Secretary Sir Brendan Barber’s proposals for gutting pensions, a review commissioned by Khan, is being submitted to the government. Major cuts were announced last week across the London bus network with dozens of routes facing the axe and hundreds of jobs potentially threatened.

To the extent the unions had a strategy in response to the cuts, it was to use the threat of strike action to force Khan and TfL to negotiate. This was coupled with bankrupt appeals to Sadiq Khan and Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer to “decide which side you are on”.

Such worthless appeals to Labour were repeated yesterday, with RMT leader Mick Lynch declaring, “we urge the mayor to stand up to the Tory government who are cutting funding to TfL rather than try to pick a fight with tube workers.” Lynch told the press, “We are demanding a direct face-to-face meeting with Mayor Sadiq Khan to sort this mess out.”

A spokesperson for Khan told the BBC that TfL and the RMT met at conciliation service ACAS last week. The BBC reported, “Over the weekend, the mayor’s office was in touch with RMT, and TfL had offered the RMT a meeting over the weekend, but the union declined to meet until after the strike action had taken place, the spokesperson said.”

Khan’s position on the bail-out measures is clear: he is implementing them. The RMT’s entreaties serve the sole purpose of demobilising workers and wearing down their opposition, giving Khan and the Tories the breathing space required to enforce the cuts.

The RMT’s promotion as a “militant” and “left-wing” union is being exposed as a fiction. By rights, the Johnson government should now be facing a wave of strikes across the London Underground and national rail. Nearly 40,000 rail workers voted to strike last month at train operating companies and Network Rail. But the RMT’s National Executive has voted to shelve strikes and enter talks via the Johnson government’s Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG). The RIRG is a corporatist partnership between rail bosses and unions set-up to enforce the Tories’ Great British Railways privatisation agenda.

A statement issued by the RMT’s NEC last week explained, “The union has the same position as it always has—to seek job security with a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies; that any changes to

structures, working practices, or conditions have to be agreed with our union, not imposed; and that our members deserve a negotiated pay increase that addresses the rising cost of living.”

In other words, voluntary redundancies will be accepted, while regressive changes to work practices will be ratified so long as they are negotiated by the union.

Prime Minister Johnson felt emboldened to wade into the dispute today on the London Underground, condemning the strikes, through an official spokesperson, as “deeply disappointing” and issuing a veiled threat that “Obviously industrial relations at TfL are a matter for TfL and the mayor but it’s clear that under the current funding settlement TfL must take all reasonable steps to avoid industrial action.”

The unions’ role in dividing and suppressing strike action is handing the initiative to a government wracked by crisis. Johnson’s condemnation of the tube strikes came the same day as a Tory leadership contest threatened to remove him from office. Yet the trade union leadership is concerned above all that any moves against Johnson must be confined to a palace coup, with a distant prospect of a transition to a right-wing Labour government. They are seeking to prevent the intervention of the working class, blocking any challenge to the rule of Britain’s financial oligarchy in the fight for socialism.



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