

# RMT union sell out London Underground dispute claiming “progress”

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union called off four days of scheduled strikes this week on the London Underground (LU) against job losses and attacks on pensions and conditions.

The RMT’s sellout was based on claims of “significant progress” at closed-door negotiations with government conciliation service Acas. After claiming that Transport for London’s (TfL) “original plans for jobs cuts and pension changes will not be carried out,” the union admitted this was not a withdrawal but only a delay.

In the union’s words, these “concessions” are just “longer guarantees of earnings, no pension changes for at least three years, and so-called productivity proposals... have been halted.” At best, this is kicking the issues down the road. The unions involved in the dispute are in a war of attrition with their own members.

The RMT was due to have held staggered actions across “different grades and sections of the Tube” between July 23-28. Little to no service was expected July 25 and 27, and none at all on 26 and 28. A concurrent strike of RMT members on national rail was also expected to affect other services on the TfL network.

Members of the ASLEF drivers’ union and Unite the Union were also due to strike on July 26 and 28. Both have also suspended action.

Around 600 jobs are to be cut from LU (more than 10 percent of station staff), undermining maintenance and leaving stations more likely to be understaffed, while drivers’ agreements and jobs are also under attack.

The strikes were also a response to TfL’s plans to impose a £100 million pensions cut and end a final salary pension scheme. The attack on pensions was advanced by Sir Brendan Barber, former head of the

Trades Union Congress and then Acas, as the trade-off for government pandemic “recovery” funding for TfL.

The systematic defunding of public transport has intensified with the requirement for financing the war in Ukraine, with striking underground workers smeared last year as “Putin’s stooges.” Tube workers have shown a clear determination to fight, but the handling of the strike demonstrates how the unions have sought to suppress that sentiment.

A 94 percent majority was returned in January 2022. Under draconian anti-union legislation, mandates must be renewed after six months. Repeated reballots have seen a consistently high vote for action: over 90 percent on a 53.1 percent turnout in June 2022, 94 percent on a 52 percent turnout in December, and 96 percent on a 56.5 percent turnout in May this year.

Last December, RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said it was “an impressive feat for any set of workers to return a third strike ballot in favour of more action.”

But what have RMT members got for this determination? The union held five days of strike action against job losses and pension attacks last year, with an additional strike against the 600 job cuts. There was a day’s strike in March. Eighteen months after that first strike vote, with the latest strikes called off, the union’s pledge to take “whatever action is necessary” rings hollow.

When the first strike vote was taken, LU’s managing director Andy Lord stated that “Nobody has or will [sic] lose their jobs as a result of the proposals we have set out and there are no current plans to change the TfL pension or terms and conditions.”

The RMT can only present its negotiations with the company as being in “good faith” because they are implicated in decisions already taken. As Lord put it, TfL “have been working with our staff and trade union

colleagues for a number of months as proposals are developed.”

On July 14, the RMT cancelled a planned overtime and rest day working ban, claiming “further progress” on station staffing. That progress was restoration of 27 positions, updating of 27 CSA2 positions to CSA1 and making 10 part-time station roles full-time, which would “have the effect of restoring the proportion of weekend rest days to the level before the 600 job cuts process was imposed.”

This is not about fighting job cuts, but managing them: “The review of station rosters and staffing levels will continue to ensure resilience of the staffing model in light of a sharp increase in station closures.”

Twice this year, Lynch has written to Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan raising safety concerns about understaffing of stations. In April, he noted that stations had been closed on 2,115 occasions in 2022, compared with a pre-pandemic high of 649.

“Of course,” he wrote, “this is only a figure for closures. More often, stations will have been left open with no staff.”

In January, Lynch cited the Minimum Staffing Levels established after the 1987 King’s Cross fire, where 31 people died. He said waivers to safety regulations were increasingly being used to open stations “with a staffing level below that considered to be consistent with passenger safety.”

This, he said, is “the direct consequence of the destaffing of the Tube in recent years and, most critically, of LU management’s decision to delete 600 station staff posts.”

His appeal for a moratorium on waivers is a cynical attempt to conceal the RMT’s role in facilitating destaffing over many years. Stations are left unmanned because of the RMT’s inactions in the past.

In 2014, the union disarmed opposition to the closure of all 260 Tube ticket offices. Having known for two years that this was proposed without doing anything, the union blustered about strikes while delaying action. Opposition was dissipated into legal challenges on an individual station basis, resulting in the closure of the offices with barely a fight.

The union is now replaying that process with the closure of 1,007 national rail ticket offices, agreeing to a toothless “consultation” programme and staging two perfunctory protest days. The announcement of these

closures, facilitated by the RMT’s participation in the Rail Delivery Group, came barely a fortnight after Lynch had boasted at the union congress “We have achieved much... no ticket office has closed.”

Lynch has called on Khan “to align himself” with the RMT and Tube workers “in pushing back against the Tory government.” These appeals to the Labour Party are aimed at suppressing any independent action by workers. Last year, Lynch was asking Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer to “decide which side you are on.” Starmer at the time was threatening to expel MPs even for visiting picket lines.

The “progress” the unions report is similarly based on some future Labour government. ASLEF suspended their action because “There will be no changes to pension benefits before the next general election.”

Changes would be subject to legislation and therefore will not happen until 2026. This allows the unions to continue to claim to be fighting attacks, while keeping their place at the negotiating table to enable those attacks to proceed more smoothly. Khan praised them for managing “to avoid industrial action” despite “the onerous funding deal conditions imposed by the government.”

To wage the struggle necessary to defend their jobs, pensions wages and conditions, LU workers need to wrest control of the dispute from the unions that are stifling them. Countering the steady erosion of the strike mandate by the RMT, and the separation of grades and groups, workers must organise their own unified, coordinated action across TfL and the national transport network.

Rank-and-file committees must be elected at every workplace to formulate key demands and get workers organised, linking up with other sections of the working class across the UK, Europe and internationally.



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