

London Underground workers to strike in New Year over pay

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Around 10,000 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are set to take a week of rolling strike action on London Underground in the New Year from January 5-12. The strike over pay involves all RMT grades on the Tube, including drivers, engineering and maintenance workers, signalling and station and control room staff.

Transport for London (TfL), which also oversees rail, tram and bus services in the capital, announced its “full and final” pay offer for 2023-4 of just 5 percent for the 16,000 workforce on London Underground in October. This is a drastic a real terms pay cut. It is backdated to when it was due to start in April when inflation (RPI) stood at 14.1 percent. It was still at 8.9 percent in October. The final offer also includes a freeze on pay bands. Any London Underground worker near the top of their band is excluded from even the 5 percent if it moves them to a higher band. They would instead receive a one-off lump sum payment.

The de facto wage cut is the latest chapter in the cost cutting drive agreed between the London Mayor Sadiq Khan, of the Labour Party, and the Conservative government—accompanying a £1.2 billion bailout in August 2022 of TfL during the pandemic. The decline in passenger numbers worsened the chronic underfunding of the transport system following the Tory government’s decision to end the central grant for day to day running costs in 2015.

The bailout tied funding to the imposition of draconian austerity measures and included a commitment to enforce cuts of £230 million by March 2024 in addition to the £730 million per year “recurring savings” to which TfL was already committed. A series of earlier cash infusions saw Khan impose regressive taxation and fare hikes and a fire sale of public assets.

RMT members voted to strike by over 90 percent on

December 19. The miserly pay offer also faces resistance from London Underground workers represented by other unions. Unite had asked for an improved offer of 6.1 percent and the Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association (TSSA) representing managers and technical staff have rejected the pay award, according to the *Evening Standard*. However, there have been no announcements made by either union of any plans to organise action.

In the case of ASLEF, Khan and TfL have been able to directly rely on the leaders of the train drivers’ union to back the sub-standard deal, which was recommended to its members and accepted in a ballot earlier this month.

ASLEF District Organiser Finn Brennan portrayed it as a two-year deal based on last year’s award to declare, “This offer means we have achieved, for our Tube train driver members, a 13.8% pay rise over two years.

“It is a no-strings offer, which shows that agreements can be reached without industrial action, when employers are prepared to sit round the table and negotiate a settlement.”

Mick Lynch, General Secretary of the RMT is presenting the union as leading the fight on London Underground, describing the deal as “unacceptable” while senior managers and commissioners are “raking it in”. The RMT has published figures showing TfL has created a “bonus pot” of £13 million for senior managers and the commissioner received an 11 percent pay rise this year, taking his salary to £395,000.

This was Lynch’s usual mixture of empty rhetoric and evasion, framing a polite appeal to the same bosses lining their pockets and leaving the door open to any slightly revised offer to serve as a pretext for calling off the strike and “avert disruption in the capital.”

The RMT has whittled down the action to a series of staggered stoppages, with combined strikes by all members across London Underground on only two days, January 8 and 10. The stoppages will start from January 5-6 by engineering drivers, followed by network controllers on January 7-8 and signalling and service control grades on January 9 and 11.

The union vetoed the two previous strikes on London Underground in July and October in the fight to defend jobs, conditions and pensions which started back in March 2022. The last strike action on the network was a joint one-day stoppage on March 15 this year by the RMT and ASLEF which brought services to a halt.

To prevent joint action and establish the framework for a sellout the RMT, ASLEF, Unite and TSSA scurried into talks with TfL at the arbitration service ACAS.

The RMT cancelled four days of rolling strike action between July 23 and 28 and Unite and ASLEF called off two days of stoppages over the same week on London Underground, with Lynch and other union leaders citing “significant progress” made at ACAS.

The flimsy pretext for this was that the planned overhaul of the TfL pension scheme would be postponed until after the next general election. This leaves on the table plans drawn up in the Barber Report, drawn up by ex-Trades Union Congress General secretary Sir Brendan Barber, outlining a raid on worker’s pensions, including higher contributions and lower benefits.

The RMT claimed it had secured “longer guarantees on protection of earnings, no pension changes for at least three years and so-called productivity proposals which would have damaged the terms and conditions of RMT members have been halted”.

Lynch now declares, five months later, that the final pay award resulting from ACAS talks laid the basis for a “two-tier workforce”.

The ACAS talks in fact saw the RMT and other union leaders agree to the managed decline of London Underground while strike action was blocked.

On October 4 and 6, two days of strike action by RMT were cancelled with similar progress cited at ACAS. TfL had announced plans to slash up to 600 station staff jobs on London Underground with the reduction of 10 percent of the workforce implemented by not replacing staff who left. The RMT hailed as a

victory the reinstatement of 213 jobs while accepting the elimination of 300.

What has also been exposed is the claim that Sadiq Khan would “align himself” with “pushing back against the Tory government”.

No confidence can be placed in the RMT to oppose the below inflation deal on London Underground or defend terms and conditions and pensions. As its record shows, Lynch and the RMT executive worked to strangle the determined fight by 40,000 rail workers over pay, the defence of jobs and opposition to brutal restructuring. This started in March with the sellout on Network Rail based on 9 percent two-year pay deal with the elimination of 1,900 maintenance jobs. In November, the 18-month struggle against the 14 train operating companies (TOCs) was ended based on a Memorandum of Understanding including a 5 percent pay agreement for 2022/3 with the pay award for 2023/4 pushed back to next Spring and tied to “workplace reforms” agreed on a company-by-company basis.

The unity of London Underground workers can only be built from below by the rank-and-file against the union apparatus, which functions as an extended arm of the employers and government.

RMT picket lines should be respected by all London Underground workers. Unite and TSSA members should demand a ballot for strike action against the 5 percent final offer. ASLEF members should call for a vote of no confidence in their leadership for promoting the rotten deal.

The opposition to the savage cost cutting measures means rejecting all attempts to present the London Mayor as an ally. Starmer’s Labour Party is outflanking the Tories in the run up to a General Election as the most loyal representative of big business committed to austerity and smothering workers’ opposition through its faithfully servants in the union bureaucracy.



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