

ASLEF calls off London Underground strikes claiming attack on train drivers is “resolved”

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Train drivers’ union ASLEF, representing 2,000 London Underground drivers, called off two days of strikes last week set for April 8 and May 4. Union negotiators claimed to have won a deal that “resolves the key issues in our dispute”.

The strike was cancelled following a meeting of 70 ASLEF reps who unanimously endorsed an agreement with London Underground Limited (LUL) while refusing to put it to a ballot of members.

ASLEF announced strike dates last month after tube drivers returned a 98 percent vote for industrial action off a 70 percent turnout. ASLEF official Finn Brennan reiterated in a March 20 letter to members that the strike was “over London Underground’s failure to give assurances that changes to our members’ terms and conditions will not be imposed without agreement and that all existing agreements will be honoured.”

Brennan was referring to LUL management’s “Trains Modernisation” agenda, a drastic assault on drivers’ conditions, safety and pay.

His letter explained: “The ‘Trains Modernisation’ plan is designed to cut hundreds of drivers’ jobs and save £35 million per year by forcing through ‘efficiencies’”.

The “efficiencies”, outlined in a Train Modernisation Plan drafted by Transport for London and its LUL subsidiary, included:

- Booking on and off at depots and remote locations on drivers’ own time adding hours to the time spent at work every week
- Increasing all current rostering parameters, (the time spent in the driving cab) to maximise ‘efficiency’ with up to 25 percent increase in driving time
- The end of all fixed links
- Drastically cutting the number of spare turns and making those that remain flexible’ so that drivers’ booking on and finishing time can be changed at short notice

- Cutting walking and train prep time so driving spells can be increased even more

- Removing all local and line agreements
- Introducing 24 hour booking on and off so drivers can start and finish at any time, and night turns are eliminated.

After closed-door talks at ACAS a deal was reached. Announcing the lifting of strikes last Thursday, Brennan stated: “We’ve made really good progress during two days of quite intense negotiations at ACAS. We are very pleased that the Trains Modernisation project management had planned to push through has now been scrapped. The team dealing with it has been disbanded and any *changes will only come about by agreement*.”

“*This has been a key issue for us over the last four years and I’m really proud of what our negotiating team has achieved.*” (Emphasis added)

ASLEF also touted company promises that extra security will be deployed on the Night Tube, and a new door locking system installed to prevent passengers from opening cab doors and threatening staff. A three-day training refresher for drivers cancelled at the start of the pandemic is being reinstated.

The promises made by LUL and TfL are not worth the paper they are written on. Drivers’ cabins will not be made safe until the end of 2026, and Night Tube security is “an extra team of transport support and security officers”. Drivers’ refresher training reportedly includes “other content” that marks a departure from pre-COVID arrangements.

While ASLEF claims the Train Modernisation Team has been “disbanded”, a different story emerges from Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union leader Mick Lynch’s April 5 circular to its train driver members on the underground: “The trains modernisation team had been removed from that project and were instead *looking at standardising working arrangements across depots*.”

Management made clear they had no plans to return to trains modernisation proposals *at this time*.” (Emphasis added).

Lynch states they have guarantees that TfL will not “impose” changes. He is making the same point as ASLEF that any changes will be negotiated via the unions. Firstly, securing their privileged positions by restoring their feet under the table and secondly minimising industrial action. Brennan explained, “We were not asking for any more money or any improvements in conditions. We were simply making sure that any change that is proposed is done through discussion and negotiation.”

The RMT did not even ballot its own members for joint action with ASLEF drivers. Despite incessant efforts to promote the RMT as a “militant” union, its officials have played a key role in blocking united action across the national railways and London Underground. On Monday, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) announced hundreds of its customer service managers will strike alone on April 10 and April 11.

Such divide-and-rule tactics are deliberate. They are aimed at facilitating the government’s agenda for rail reform via corporatist bodies such as the Rail Delivery Group and ACAS.

Lynch’s circular underscores that TfL’s “withdrawal” of the modernisation plan is purely tactical. It wants to prevent a wave of strikes during London’s mayoral elections on May 2, with Labour’s Sadiq Khan seeking re-election. More important still, a general election is due later this year. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has made clear his cabinet’s absolute hostility to strikes, threatening to expel shadow cabinet ministers who visit picket lines. This is a clear signal that TfL’s assault on London transport workers will be renewed aggressively.

Currently 10,000 RMT members are balloting for strike action over further attacks on jobs, working conditions and pensions. The ballot concludes at the end of April. LUL workers are under constant siege by the Tory government and TfL, led by the mayor’s office.

In January, the RMT imposed a below-inflation pay deal on thousands of Tube workers after Khan’s personal intervention. Khan boasted recently, “there was going to be five days of industrial action. We stepped in, worked with TfL and the trade unions, and that was called off”. Khan has also bragged that, unlike the Tories, he has reduced strikes on the underground by 70 percent during his time as mayor.

Khan is a close ally of Starmer and, in alliance with the

Tory government, has agreed year-on-year historic attacks on London transport including billions in budget cuts.

Pseudo-left groups active on the London Underground present the RMT as a left-wing alternative to ASLEF. One such organisation, Workers Liberty, and its *TubeWorker* blog, act as friendly advisers to the RMT bureaucracy. One of its members Janine Booth sat on the union’s executive where she covered for its collusion with Labour and the Tory government’s rail reforms.

On April 3, Workers Liberty called on the RMT to repeat its 2013-2016 campaign against “Fit for Future” – Stations”, entailing the mass closure of ticket offices on the underground. Despite a massive strike mandate and with huge public support, the fight was betrayed by the RMT which called off action and helped oversee the closure of 268 LUL ticket offices, with thousands of staff made redundant or forced into other posts. *TubeWorker* describes this act of treachery as “missteps” calling the closures a “significant setback for station staff”. But they add it was “less bad than it might’ve been because negotiations over it had taken place under pressure from an ongoing dispute and several rounds of strikes. Now we’re faced with what is essentially ‘Fit for the Future — Trains’, we need the same approach.”

Whoever wins the mayoral and general elections, the assault on all sections of London transport will be escalated. The rank-and-file must organise to meet this threat and defeat the concerted effort of the union bureaucracy to remove the membership from decision making. The divisive policies of the unions must be combated to restore basic class solidarity between all grades, as part of a socialist opposition to the market-driven assault imposed by Tory and Labour governments.



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