

# London Underground and Docklands Light Rail strike begins

**Michael Barnes****5 September 2025**

More than 11,000 members of the Rail Maritime Transport Workers union (RMT) on the London Underground (the Tube) and Docklands Light Railway (DLR) began a week of rolling strikes Friday over pay, working conditions and chronic understaffing.

Tube workers, who have suffered declining wages for at least five years, voted to strike by a 96 percent majority off a 59 percent turnout. They rejected a 3.1 percent pay offer (later upped to 3.4 percent) by London Underground Limited (LUL) for the 2025-26 pay period. DLR workers voted to strike by 96 percent off a 69 percent turnout against an even more derisory offer of 2.6 percent, increased to 3.4 percent based on productivity strings. The current rate of RPI which includes housing costs stands at 4.8 percent.

The right-wing media have initiated a smear campaign against Tube and DLR workers out of fear that London's rolling strikes could spark a wider eruption against the Starmer Labour government's austerity measures. In 2022, strikes on the London Underground kicked off the biggest strike wave since 1987 that nearly toppled Margaret Thatcher's hated Conservative government.

Tube and DLR workers are fighting the consequences of massive austerity cuts and wage suppression enforced by Transport for London (TfL) on behalf of successive Tory and Labour governments.

LUL employs 2,000 fewer workers than it did prior to the COVID pandemic but ridership on the Tube has returned to 88 percent of pre-pandemic levels, leaving stations dangerously understaffed. Its refusal to fill vacancies has led to a "major problem" with lone working, extreme shifts and fatigue, the RMT reports. Management have seized on the situation to impose attacks under "train modernisation"—a "compressed" working week resulting in longer hours on the job before workers take a rest day.

Contrary to press attacks on "overpaid" workers,

average pay for a Station Assistant on the underground is £25,671 per year, while a Level 3 Signaller is on £27,944. Meanwhile, TfL commissioner Andy Lord received a 22 percent pay increase this year, taking his yearly income to £639,000. Lord was rewarded for his "success" in bringing TfL finances back into the black.

In 2021, the Johnson government seized on collapsing fare revenues during the pandemic to engineer a financial crisis at TfL. The Tories withheld central government grants and made "bailout" funding conditional on austerity agreements that were signed by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

In 2024-25, TfL made an operating profit of £166 million off the back of major attacks on transport workers and a fire sale of assets, combined with increased passenger numbers and fare revenue. While the Starmer government trumpeted its £2.2 billion commitment to fund a capital upgrade on LUL it made clear that day-to-day running costs must be financed through fare revenue and other efficiencies.

In March, Khan hiked Tube and rail fares by 4.6 percent, following a 5.9 percent increase in 2023, the largest in a decade. Even before this, London Underground was the most expensive metro system of any capital in the world, with fares costing 29 pence per kilometre, double the average across world cities.

RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey, who replaced Mick Lynch in March, has refused to put a figure on current pay talks and has spoken instead of a "suitable" offer in line with RPI and moves toward a 32-hour week. Dempsey told the media, "They are not after a King's ransom, but fatigue and extreme shift rotations are serious issues impacting on our members health and wellbeing, all of which have not been adequately addressed for years by LU management."

In media interviews Dempsey has reiterated his preference for reaching a deal to avert the strikes. On

Thursday, the *London Evening Standard* reported, “Tube strikes twist: ‘Small cut in hours’ could lead to breakthrough as RMT ‘makes handbrake turn’ on walkout talks.” An RMT source told the newspaper: “Our union’s policy is for a 32-hour week, but it’s obvious even a small cut in hours would take the pressure off.”

Dempsey’s concern is to strengthen the RMT’s corporatist relationship with Labour’s mayor, who has previously bragged of presiding over higher productivity and fewer strike days on London transport than his Tory predecessor Boris Johnson.

In a leaflet issued by the RMT in June calling for a strike vote, Dempsey said: “LUL is saving over £100m this year and future years because of a reduction in the employers’ pension contribution. They could give us a pay rise and a cut in working hours and still have a lower pay bill than last year.”

But since when have workers agreed to their pensions being reduced? Since 2021, tube workers have voted seven times to strike to protect pensions.

The RMT’s week of action on the tube and DLR blocks a unified offensive by London transport workers. Strikes are being staggered across separate days: Ruislip Depot Operational Managers (separate to main dispute) strike from 6pm Friday and Saturday over pay parity. On September 7, Tube Track Access Controllers, Control Centre, Power/Control and ERU members will strike. On September 8 Tube Fleet Engineering, Stations and Trains will strike. On September 9 Tube Signallers, Service Control, ERU will strike, followed September 10 by all Tube Fleet, Engineering, Stations, trains. On September 11 Signallers, Service Control will strike. DLR workers will strike on September 9 and 11.

Dempsey was promoted as a left-wing firebrand during the 2022-23 strike wave. But he worked with Lynch and the RMT national executive to betray national railway and Tube workers’ demands, setting one below-inflation pay deal after another and facilitating mass job losses at Network Rail among track maintenance workers compromising safety. Lynch founded the campaign group “Enough is Enough,” deploying militant rhetoric against the Tories, while shutting down the strike movement and corralling workers behind the election of a Starmer Labour government.

Tube workers must be ready to oppose any repeat of the sellout last November when strike action was pulled at the eleventh hour to enforce a substandard pay award of 5 percent with lump sums, agreed by the union national executive without a vote of the membership.

Despite a 96 percent strike mandate, Lynch and the executive suspended November’s rolling action at the last minute, claiming a “significantly improved offer” that did not differ substantially from the 4.6 percent offer. The NEC’s bureaucratic veto openly defied a mass reps’ meeting which had voted to proceed with strikes, reinstating the union apparatus as a tool to suppress rank-and-file opposition. Jared Wood, a leading member of the Socialist Party and the RMT’s London Transport Regional Organiser openly justified the sellout agreement. He claimed the crumbs were a “significant increase” after stating only weeks earlier that the offer did not meet RPI inflation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* explained that these manoeuvres were not mistakes but a deliberate strategy to prevent tube workers from becoming a focal point for wider opposition to Labour’s austerity agenda. WSWS warned that only rank-and-file control—breaking from the union bureaucracy—could secure an inflation-busting pay rise and defend jobs and pensions against TfL’s ongoing attacks.

Workers on the Tube and DLR should initiate strike committees to take control of the dispute, insisting on complete oversight and control by the members on all negotiations over pay, terms and conditions, and staffing.

A minimum 30 percent pay increase is needed to reverse years of pay decline. All 2,000 jobs lost since the beginning of the Covid pandemic must be filled and lone working banned. The pay bands agreed by the RMT last year that cap pay must be abolished. And critically, all attacks on LUL pensions must be reversed.

Workers must reject all claims that there is “no money” to fund their demands. Billions must be allocated to upgrade and expand the Tube, DLR and national rail system, improving pay, conditions and pensions for staff and making public transport affordable. This means a political struggle against the Starmer government, which is funnelling billions to military rearmament and war, with workers footing the bill through brutal austerity.



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