

# London Underground workers launch powerful strikes: “Our safety is not up for grabs any further”

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London Underground services were brought to a standstill Monday as thousands of tube workers—including fleet engineering, drivers and station staff—walked off the job. It is part of a week of rolling strike action by members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) demanding redress over stagnating pay, chronic staff shortages and being rostered to exhaustion.

Workers on the Docklands Light Rail are striking from Tuesday.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited picket lines on Monday morning. Tube workers explained they are facing a growing burden of ill health and that government cuts and austerity are threatening public safety.

Pickets also took up the defence of hundreds of their colleagues who face deportation because of punitive income thresholds introduced by the Labour government aimed at driving up deportations and promoting anti-immigrant poison.

A tube driver on a picket line in south London told WSWs: “The cuts threaten our safety remit. We’re responsible for keeping London going. And if we are unable to maintain a decent work-life balance, it’s going to impact badly on the safety issues that we are already having.

“People think it’s just a five-day week. That doesn’t mean we only do five days and then two days off. It can be that we do seven days in a row, then we’ll have a couple of days off, and come back. And you’re talking about moving from extreme shift to extreme shift. We’ll do dead earlies, we’ll do earlies, we’ll do midday, we’ll do lates and we’ll do dead lates and nights... it goes from one extreme to the next.”

Tube workers are calling for a 32-hour week: “Drivers on lines that are manual driving [as opposed to driverless], we’re moving the train, we’re breaking the train, opening the doors, observing the stations, observing the platform train interface. So that is a big safety issue. There are upgrades on it, which makes it a lot easier. But at the same time, modernisation does come with, I think, a heavy price and we’re not willing to pay that price and risk the safety of our passengers.

“I do deep tunnel work. At the end of my shift every day, my nose is black. In terms of what my lung capacity is, 24 years working for the underground, it’s been reduced by about 20 percent. Hearing gets impacted by about 10 percent naturally, and worse if you’re using earphones. So, imagine braking around the corners, that screeching actually decreases our ear capacity by about 10 to 15 percent on top of that. Our safety is not up for grabs any further. We’re already putting our bodies and our lives at risk. And I think that is a misconception that unfortunately the public have, that we’re just money grabbers.

“We are in solidarity with our station staff and our cleaners. They clearly need an uplift, and we need to be able to stand in solidarity with them to help them get that uplift.”

His colleague spoke about the impact of station staff shortages: “Our stations run on overtime. If we don’t get the bodies doing the overtime, then stations have a propensity to close, which impacts on customers who can’t get trains. Just like with the drivers, our bodies are tired, we do extreme shifts. If we’re doing seven nights in a row, the first of the two days that we get resting is not really a rest day. It’s basically a day where you’re sleeping all day. And then we do three

days on and then one day off, and three days and then one day off, and then seven early.

“So that takes an impact on your body clock. Your mealtimes are different, your sleeping pattern’s different, your quality of life is different in terms of trying to work out how much time you have, in terms of your body clock and all the shifts. And just like my colleague said, if you’re working in the deep tunnel station, you’re there all day, you’re faced with dust all day. The dust does have an impact on the insides of your body.

“Once again, it is not just about money. There are more important things than money, because your life, your quality of life is important as well. Yes, money is important because we’ve got things to pay for. But when you have capitalists and fat cats who earn the biggest wages, and then they’re looking at us, the foot soldiers that do all the work, and they’re looking at us making excuses as to not paying us, and not giving us what we want in terms of quality of life, then this is why we’re on strike. We don’t want to be on strike, but sometimes we have to go on strike for them to listen and for us to say, look, this is not a joke. You’re fine because you can potentially work from home. Most of us can’t. So therefore, this is not a joke. We want you to listen to us. If you’re not going to listen to us, this is the result.”

Another tube worker said, “And the last thing I’d like to highlight is awareness about our colleagues who because of the July 22 changes in the immigration law, are no longer considered skilled workers and they are having their sponsorship taken away from TFL [Transport for London] and could possibly face deportation. I think it’s a travesty.

“Our work is very much safety critical. It is skilled work. When we had COVID we were considered key workers then. So how come, a couple of years later, all of a sudden, we are no longer skilled workers? And we’re not trying to gain sympathy. We’re trying to make everyone knows that everyone that works, underground and TFL, they’re just like everybody else. And in terms of somebody that’s left from their country of origin, come over here, made a lot of sacrifices... they’re not responsible for being a drain on the system. They’re working, they’re paying tax, they’re being a law-abiding citizen. The fact that they’re then left... and [the government is] saying,

‘okay, your contribution was what it was, and now we no longer care about you, go back home’, is a disgrace.

“And the fact that a Labour government have implemented that is an absolute travesty and a disgrace. And it’s about time that working class people are put on the forefront, are taken care of and listened to. I’m not trivializing it, but if people were to just put away their bigotry, their fascism, they would see that we’re all in a system that is built on inequality and if we were to come together, it would be a better place.

Another tube worker explained, “Can I just say as well that I think it’s Labour pandering to the far-right? Because we all know the far-right rhetoric, we know about Reform rhetoric on immigration... So, in terms of the whole [income] threshold change, it is Labour pandering to the far-right, trying to get more votes from Reform UK to Labour so that they can be the face of anti-immigration and to divide the working class.”

Another picketer added: “I used to be a Labour supporter, but no, not anymore. But to be clear, we’re not Conservative supporters either. Their rhetoric speaks volumes about the people they are trying to attract. However, that’s not what we know as Labour. We know Labour as the party that were for the working class, that stood for socialism, that stood for fairness in society. But not now.”



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