

Eddie Dempsey's “Improved Pay Offer” on London Underground prepares a sellout, as workers push back

Our reporters
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A press release by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) on September 29 announced there was an “Improved pay offer for Tube workers” following talks with Transport for London (TfL).

But RMT’s cursory 100-word statement reporting the outcome of weeks of closed-door discussions with London Underground Limited (LUL) management shows its claims of an “improvement” are hollow.

LUL’s 3.4 percent pay offer for this year remains unchanged—despite RMT members having rejected this pittance during their week-long strike in September. They were joined by colleagues on London’s Docklands Light Railway who threw out an identical below-inflation deal, with RPI at 4.6 percent.

The RMT and LUL have repackaged this miserly sum into a three-year deal, which includes RPI-linked uplifts in the second and third years. A separate RMT circular to members on September 29 confirms LUL management has met none of the strike’s key demands. On pay alone, a real-terms wage cut this year will be followed by two years of pay stagnation.

The RMT press release stated, “RMT general secretary Eddie Dempsey congratulated members for their steadfast support for strike action.” But RMT members launched strike action to demand a cost-of-living increase. Dempsey and RMT negotiators disappeared into meetings with LUL management and TfL executives from September 17, demobilising the rank-and-file opposition and suppressing a current strike mandate while they put together a sellout agreement.

Dempsey used the press release to announce, “This offer will now be discussed by the national executive committee (NEC) and in consultation with the membership”. But the RMT’s circular to members stated the NEC “will discuss this matter and a Reps meeting is likely to be called” with workers invited to contact their Rep to share their “views”.

Besides renegeing on the pay demand, the RMT’s

announcement was marked by a glaring omission: reducing the working week from 35 to 32 hours and tackling fatigue resulting from extreme shifts was a core strike demand.

Ahead of the dispute, TfL had declared that even a 30-minute reduction to duty times was “unaffordable,” claiming that limited funds should be focused on delivering wage improvements. Ultimately, neither has been delivered. Yet Dempsey, accepting TfL’s either-or framework, is now predictably hyping the three-year pay deal, treating London Underground workers’ health as expendable.

The contracted 35-hour week has become a misnomer. London Underground staff are working longer hours to compensate for the elimination of 2,000 station jobs since the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, even as passenger numbers have returned to pre-pandemic levels. Passenger safety has been compromised, with large stretches of the network outside central London unstaffed and staff being exposed to the dangers of lone working.

Dempsey told *BBC Politics Live* that existing shift patterns for London Underground workers can reduce their life expectancy by up to 10 years. But while citing research showing the deadly consequences of punishing shiftwork for tube workers, he did not challenge the media’s lies that London Underground was too heavily subsidised.

Failing to point out that central government grants were eliminated in 2018, with day-to-day running costs funded entirely by passenger revenue, Dempsey accepted TfL’s cost-cutting framework. He stated, “We’ve helped to deliver a £166 million surplus in London Underground. We’ve got ridership up to record levels and we are doing that with 2,000 fewer staff than we were before the pandemic.”

London Underground workers never agreed to this. They have repeatedly handed strike mandates to the RMT executive to defend jobs, pay and pensions, only to see their action called off with false claims that “progress” was being made.

What is now unravelling in closed-door talks between

RMT officials and management is Dempsey's hollow claim that a "compromise" can be reached which "works on both sides". This language of collaboration has inevitably led to complete surrender.

Dempsey's negotiations—described as "peace talks"—were convened to stifle demands for action against savage new cuts being demanded by Labour mayor Sadiq Khan. This includes further ticket office closures. Dempsey knows that any challenge to Khan involves a direct confrontation with the austerity dictates of the Starmer Labour government—a political fight that would win mass support.

London tube workers have immediately challenged the RMT's claims of an "improved pay offer". On the RMT's Facebook page, one tube worker wrote: "This is in no way an improved offer. This misleading post needs removing."

Another wrote angrily: "There is nothing 'improved' about it. Terrible deal that does nothing for us or our fatigue levels."

A colleague wrote: "The membership says no. There is no improvement whatsoever. Instead, it ties our hands for 3 years before we can make any improvements to the working week, staff travel facilities or the scope of the pay rises. Absolutely not acceptable."

Tube workers across the network have expressed their dissatisfaction. A *World Socialist Web Site* article, "Eddie Dempsey calls for 'compromise' in London Underground 'peace talks': Workers must seize the initiative", provoked interest and discussion over the past week.

A station assistant on the Bakerloo line said, "I've briefly read the offer. It is the same old line... the company are refusing to meet our demands on fatigue. It used to be the case that colleagues working in the Kings Cross area stayed in the area. Now I'm hearing they are asking staff to go to other areas because of staff shortages. That was never the case in the past. Staff shortages are not dealt with in the latest offer, putting more pressure on us as they are desperate to get staff to cover areas. Thank you for doing this. I'll read your leaflet and hand it out."

Another worker on the Jubilee Line said the new offer failed to meet what the strikes set out to change, "I've read all the union briefings. It amounts to nothing; it's more than likely we'll be going back on strike. I'll take your leaflet and read it."

A station attendant on the Northern Line also spoke on the deal's failure to address fatigue and longer hours, "Dempsey allows management time and again to get away with things. He just does things to appease management. There is daily pressure on colleagues when we finish work to cover shifts at a different station in another area.

"Me and my co-workers live near this station, and we are being pressured to cover a station in South London, [on] the

other side of the city at 7 a.m. the following day. We used to have thirty-day rosters from our base station, where we live. Now we can be asked to go anywhere in the network."

Tube workers must intervene to prevent a sell-out deal between the RMT executive and reps. The membership mandated the action. Yet not only have their key demands not been met, but they have also been ditched. On this basis, the revised offer is unfit to put to a ballot. Workplace meetings must be organised to register opposition to this sellout and assert rank-and-file control of the dispute.

In practice, Dempsey and the union executive agree that any deal must be self-financed by workers. De facto productivity increases are already being implemented through collusion with the RMT. This includes staff being used to plug the gaping hole left by the cull of 2,000 station staff jobs and no demand for the reinstatement of these positions or for restoring public safety. It also includes the reduction in employer contributions to the pension scheme last year, agreed by the RMT behind the backs of Tube workers.

The rank-and-file should meet to formulate non-negotiable demands, including the mass recruitment of staff and to end unsociable and dangerous shift patterns that are reducing workers' life expectancy. As the WSWS wrote last week: "Workers must reject claims there is "no money" to fund their demands. Billions must be allocated to upgrade and expand the Tube, DLR and national rail, improving pay, conditions and pensions while making transport affordable. This requires a political struggle against the Starmer government, which is funnelling billions into military rearmament and war, with workers footing the bill through austerity."



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