

London Underground drivers to strike against longer shifts under four-day week plan

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London Underground train drivers are set to strike against the implementation of a compressed four-day working week. The walkouts are scheduled for March 24–25 and 26–27, April 21–22 and 23–24, and May 19–20 and 21–22.

Around 1,800 train driver members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are involved. They are opposing management plans to use the four-day week to introduce longer shifts across fewer days, raising serious concerns over fatigue and safety.

In a ballot last month, they voted for strike action by a 91 percent majority on a 60 percent turnout.

London Underground is piloting the compressed four-day week on the Bakerloo Line. Tube drivers are contracted to work 35 hours but many work 36 hours and remain at work each day for a half-hour unpaid meal break. The changes would increase maximum shift hours from 8 to 10.

These issues were central to a week-long strike last September by 10,000 RMT members demanding a shorter working week and a genuine pay rise, which was ended by RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey and the union executive with none of the core demands met.

The legacy of the November sellout

The deal and its implementation exposes the supposed “left” credentials of Dempsey and the RMT as a militant, “member-led” union.

The September walkouts—alongside RMT members on Docklands Light Railway—shut down London Underground and gridlocked the capital, showing the power of the working class at the heart of the UK’s financial centre.

Around 10,000 tube workers—drivers, engineering, signal and station staff—demanded an end to pay erosion and a reduction of the working week from 35 to 32 hours. Staff were already working beyond contracted hours to compensate for job losses, with safety risks central to the dispute.

Tube workers were in no mood to compromise with Transport for London (TfL) and Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan who oversees the transport body. As the World Socialist Web Site reported from the picket lines, the strike was seen as an opportunity to extend a struggle against social inequality, austerity and the scapegoating of migrants by the Starmer government for the collapse of public services.

However, any belief the RMT would provide a vehicle for such a fightback was refuted.

The terms on which the dispute was ended were the outcome of suppressing the struggle as a broader focal point against the Starmer government. Dempsey announced an agreement hatched behind closed doors, presented as a success.

The 3.4 percent pay offer was unchanged. Instead, the 2025/6 award—below RPI inflation of 4.6 percent—was repackaged as a three-year deal, with later years linked to RPI.

The demand for a shorter working week was ditched. There was no agreement, only further talks based on vague references to “fatigue friendly rosters” and “work-life balance discussions,”. This followed Dempsey informing the media the current shift patterns reduced life expectancy by ten years.

The only justification offered for this surrender was that it was a “no strings deal”, after stating publicly the network was operating with 2,000 fewer staff and London Underground had generated a £166 million surplus—cited not to reverse cuts, but as proof of what the RMT had “helped deliver.” This was after members had returned

one mandate after another for strike action to defend jobs and pensions and restore safe staffing levels across the network.

The sellout faced no opposition from RMT reps. They were consulted by the union executive, and their consent was used to rubber-stamp the deal, bypassing the membership who were denied a ballot.

ASLEF backs management's plan

The leaders of ASLEF—the other drivers' union on London Underground with around 2,000 members—backed management's plans for a compressed four-day week from the start. They did not mobilise their members alongside the RMT last year, having accepted the substandard three-year pay deal and distanced themselves from a joint struggle on the shorter working week.

Instead, ASLEF balloted members last April, recommending acceptance of the compressed four day week, which passed with a 70 percent majority on an 80 percent turnout. The plan was presented as beneficial, citing a paid meal break, an additional day off and an average 34-hour week, ignoring longer shifts and job losses estimated at 10 percent.

Finn Brennan, ASLEF's full-time official on London Underground smeared all opposition after securing a majority of just over half the membership stating, "Despite a campaign of disinformation and distortion by those who want to prevent drivers having improved working conditions and a better work life balance."

Brennan has since publicly attacked the planned RMT strikes, telling the *Guardian*, "It will be the first time in the history of the trade union movement that a union has voted to strike against a shorter week and fewer days at work."

This is a fraud. The minimal reduction in the working week comes at the cost of longer working days of at least 8.5 hours, increasing fatigue and safety risks. It is a productivity measure to extract more labour from a reduced workforce.

The unions are far removed from the struggle that gave rise to them. The fight for a shorter working week originally advanced the 8-hour day to curb exploitation and secure rest and recreation to assert the social rights of the working class against capitalism. Now shifts are lengthened beyond 8 hours in direct collaboration with the

employer to cull jobs and increase productivity, claiming it is about improving a "work-life balance."

ASLEF is promoting a sweetheart deal while the RMT seeks to whittle down opposition. Dempsey insists a "workable solution" can still be found with TfL having buried the fight for a shorter working week by members across London Underground.

This policing operation against a unified fight for genuine improvements is being undertaken by the bureaucracy against one of most militant sections of workers and under a Starmer government that proposes a tripartite alliance with big business.

The way forward

RMT drivers must demand oversight over all negotiations and control of their strike mandate. This fight requires forming rank-and-file committees to link up all grades across London Underground to renew the struggle for a shorter working week abandoned by Dempsey. It must include an appeal to ASLEF drivers to oppose their leadership and build a united struggle.

The claim that there is no money for a genuine shorter working week must be rejected. London is the seat of the financial oligarchy, embodying the divide between those who produce wealth and those who live off it. London Underground operates as a profit-making concern, with government subsidy withdrawn in 2018 and running costs covered by passenger revenue based on the highest fares of any metro system in the world.

A properly funded public system means ending tax giveaways to big business and the billions diverted to war—expenditures set to escalate further through the government's participation in the illegal war against Iran.



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