

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

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Around 1,800 train drivers are taking part in two days of strike action this week on London Underground against the introduction of a compressed four-day week by Transport for London (TfL), overseen by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

The two 24-hour strikes, running from midday Tuesday to Wednesday and Thursday to Friday, are the opening stage of industrial action, with further two-day stoppages scheduled for May and June.

The Tube drivers, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), are opposing TfL's restructuring agenda, which would mean longer shifts across fewer days, increasing shift lengths to eight hours 45 minutes, risking greater fatigue and concerns over safety.

This week's strikes follow the breakdown of talks between the RMT and TfL since March, with management refusing to negotiate and proceeding with implementation plans.

RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey accused TfL of a "U-turn." This is entirely cynical. On March 18, Dempsey intervened to suspend the first two days of strike action a week before they were due to go ahead, overriding a 96 percent mandate. He justified this on the pretext that "progress" had been made in talks with management.

Dempsey stated in an RMT press release: "Through our show of industrial strength and unity, we have forced management into a position where they are now willing to seriously engage with the issues our members want addressing."

This has been exposed as a fraud. The talks have broken down not due to RMT intransigence but because of TfL's hardline stance. It has used Dempsey's demobilisation of members to press ahead with the restructuring.

Why are RMT Tube drivers standing alone?

1,800 RMT tube drivers face the imposition of TfL's detrimental terms as a direct outcome of last November's sellout engineered by Dempsey and the union executive. That followed a week-long strike in September involving 10,000 RMT members across London Underground, including drivers, engineering, signalling and station staff.

Tube workers demanded action against years of pay erosion and called for a reduction of the working week from 35 to 32 hours. Staff are working beyond contracted hours to compensate for job losses, and workplace safety and fatigue is central to the dispute. Intensive night work has been found to reduce life expectancy by 10–15 years.

Dempsey shut down RMT members' fight, entering closed-door talks and returning with an unchanged 3.4 percent pay offer for 2025/26, which had already been rejected. The new offer was repackaged as a three-year deal, with later increases tied to RPI and no settlement on the core demand for a shorter working week.

The deal was presented as "no strings." But Dempsey stated that London Underground, operating with 2,000 fewer staff, had generated a £166 million surplus—conditions the RMT had "helped deliver."

A balance sheet must be drawn. These brutal conditions were not achieved with the consent of members. The RMT executive has engaged in a slicing and dicing exercise, suppressing the fight for genuine pay restoration and separating this from demands for a shorter working week, defence of jobs and pensions, despite members delivering one strike mandate after another.

The November deal was not even put to a ballot, with 10,000 RMT members who conducted the strike denied a voice. It was rubber-stamped by the union executive via consultation with RMT reps. They bypassed any ratification by members seeking to avert the prospect of a

No vote against the sellout.

Dempsey calls for “industrial peace”

On April 18, Dempsey issued a press release complaining that TfL was undermining RMT’s efforts at keeping a lid on LU workers’ anger. He stated, “The approach of TfL is not one which leads to industrial peace and will infuriate our members who want to see a negotiated settlement to this avoidable dispute.”

This appeal for “industrial peace” exposes the role of the RMT leadership and the hollowness of Dempsey’s “left” credentials as he pledges loyalty to Labour’s Mayor of London—Starmer’s local enforcer—while policing the demands of his own members.

The bureaucratic methods the RMT has relied on to demobilise opposition are coming apart. There is growing unease and anger among tube workers toward the RMT’s collusion with TfL and Khan.

In waging a week-long strike last September, tube workers were not seeking “peace” and concessions but laying down red lines. The strikes were part of a wider fightback against the Starmer government over deepening inequality, austerity and its scapegoating of migrants for the collapse of public services.

TfL has already secured such “industrial peace” through train drivers’ union Aslef, which represents around 2,000 drivers on London Underground and has not taken part in the strike action. Aslef’s leadership pushed through acceptance of the compressed four-day week in a ballot last April.

Finn Brennan, Aslef’s full-time official on the London Underground claimed the deal would mean “improved working conditions and a better work life balance.” His claims of an improved “work-life balance,” are a Trojan horse for cost cutting. The one-day reduction in the working week comes at the cost of longer daily shifts of over eight hours, raising fatigue and safety risks while enabling potential job cuts of around 10 percent.

TfL has used the collusion of Aslef’s top brass to full effect in decrying this week’s strike by RMT train driver members, telling the BBC that this week’s industrial action was “completely unnecessary”, declaring that ASLEF supports the deal as “exactly the sort every trade union should be trying to achieve”.

The division is not between ASLEF and RMT tube

drivers, but between the demands of LU workers and a union bureaucracy policing the class struggle—whether ASLEF’s sweetheart deal with TfL, or the RMT’s isolation and demobilisation tactics across its 10,000-strong membership on the London Underground.

The rank-and-file alternative

The unity of London Underground workers must be asserted against the union apparatus and the sectional divisions it sows. United action is needed to win workers’ demands for pay restoration, adequate staffing, decent hours and safe working conditions.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* put forward:

“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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