

London Underground workers must organise to resume RMT-cancelled strike

Tony Robson
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The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) called off two days of strike action by 1,800 London Underground train operators this week, without securing a single concession from Transport for London (TfL) over its drive to impose a compressed working week.

Train operators had struck for two days in April, raising vital safety concerns regarding TfL's four-day week (4DW), which would increase average daily shifts to 8 hours and 45 minutes. The plans are part of a restructuring offensive by TfL—the transport authority overseen by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan—rejected by train operators in two e-referendums held by the RMT, followed by a 91 percent vote for strike action.

The RMT cancelled the latest strikes just 24 hours before the first walkout on Tuesday, issuing a press release consisting of a single sentence: “At the 11th hour the employer has shifted its position allowing us to further explore our members’ concerns around the imposition of new rosters, fatigue and safety issues.”

Train operators had not voted to “explore” anything with management, but to oppose what the union itself had been compelled to describe as the “imposition of a fake four-day week.”

The evasive statement, issued anonymously, epitomises the bureaucracy's lack of accountability. RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey did not even attach his name to the announcement, while TfL and the Labour Mayor immediately seized upon as a green light to press ahead with restructuring.

Nick Dent, London Underground's director of customer operations, thanked the RMT and declared, “We look forward to further discussions on the implementation of these proposals with all of our trade unions.”

Khan had responded to the prospect of further strike action this week by smearing train operators as nonsensical in a broadside against them exercising their right to strike: “When trade unions go on strike no one benefits. The workers lose out on a day's salary. TfL loses out on revenues from customers. Customers are inconvenienced whether they are going to work or going to college or university.”

Following the RMT's capitulation, Khan added, “Positive to see talks continue to find a resolution to this dispute.”

Feigned concern for workers losing pay or inconvenience to

passengers is nauseating. The only disruption Khan fears is organised resistance to austerity measures using the 4DW as a Trojan horse to tear up hard-won rights—beginning with train operators but ultimately targeting the entire London Underground workforce.

The Labour Mayor and TfL executives are relying on the RMT bureaucracy wear down the determined opposition of train operators, who have drawn a red line against exhausting schedules that threaten both their health and passenger safety.

How the fight has been throttled

Dempsey has blocked strike action twice since the rolling series of stoppages was announced. In March, he called off the first planned walk-outs citing supposed “progress” in negotiations, only later admitting management had not been acting in “good faith.”

This is not a question of misjudgement. The latest cancellation—based solely on TfL-repeated claim its plans will be introduced “voluntarily”—signals that the RMT bureaucracy is accommodating and preparing a sellout. The only reason it has announced that further strike action could follow on June 2 and 4 is to keep its dead hand on the dispute it is slowly throttling.

Train operators must assert their interests against this bureaucratic stitch-up by taking control of the struggle and appealing directly to rank-and-file colleagues across London Underground.

Last September, 10,000 tube workers—train operators, engineering, signalling and station staff—entered a joint struggle over pay and working conditions through a week-long strike. But this was shut down without a membership ballot in November.

Instead, the RMT executive consulted union reps on a revised pay offer which excluded any agreement on the mandated demand to reduce the working week from 36 to 32 hours and end extreme shift patterns linked to a reduction in life expectancy of up to 10 years.

The pay deal itself retained the same derisory 3.4 percent first-year offer workers had already rejected, repackaged as a three-year agreement with the two later years linked to RPI.

The claim of a “no strings” pay deal was exposed by Dempsey’s own statements. He boasted of the RMT having “helped deliver” a network operating with 2,000 fewer staff and London Underground generating a £166 million surplus.

This was the background to the RMT announcing that negotiations over the shorter working week would proceed on a function-by-function basis—standing down the collective struggle of all grades and enabling a divide and rule approach.

ASLEF union leaders push through a sellout

The 4DW has already been accepted by ASLEF, which represents more than half of London Underground train operators—rammed through in a ballot last April. ASLEF officials opposed any scrutiny of the overhaul of working practices, repeating management talking points to present it as an unqualified gain.

Finn Brennan, ASLEF’s full-time official on London Underground, smeared all opposition as “a campaign of disinformation and distortion by those who want to prevent drivers having improved working conditions and a better work life balance.” Just over half the membership accepted the deal.

The introduction of half an hour’s paid meal relief and reduction to four-day working is outweighed by an increase in the maximum working day from 8.5 to 10 hours, the non-payment of walking time and reduced train preparation time. It also involves train operators being issued iPads so they can be contacted outside work, including at short notice over shift changes.

The scheme is entirely cost-neutral for TfL because it is based on productivity increases and gig-economy working practices.

Dempsey made no appeal to ASLEF members over the heads of the officials mounting a witch hunt against their valid concerns, when doing so would have won a powerful response. He is preparing a sellout of his own members.

The RMT’s partnership with the Labour Party

Time and again, London Underground workers have mounted, or voted to mount, determined strike action, only for their struggles to be demobilised by a bureaucracy falsely claiming “left” credentials.

The RMT’s ability to maintain a militant posture has been greatly undermined by its role in defusing a struggle against the

Starmer government—through repeated closed-door meetings with TfL and strike cancellations. Dempsey’s tub-thumping has given way to demands for “industrial peace”.

This is of a piece with the actions of the wider trade union bureaucracy amid the political crisis engulfing the Starmer government following Labour’s electoral meltdown in recent local elections and losses in Wales and Scotland. Calls for an “orderly transition” to another right-wing successor are aimed at closing ranks against a potential intervention by a struggle of the working class, fuelled by mass hostility to Labour’s agenda of continued austerity and war.

Dempsey’s predecessor as general secretary, Mick Lynch, played the same role four years ago, calling off national rail strikes during the 2022-23 strike wave following the death of Queen Elizabeth II—subordinating the class struggle to the “national interest.” This paved the way for the sellout deals later rammed through as Lynch stumped for Starmer, lecturing workers to “come to their senses and grow up a bit.”

For a struggle led by the rank-and-file

The London Underground workers’ struggle cannot be entrusted to the trade union allies of the Starmer government. Train operators should demand oversight of all negotiations with TfL and take control of their strike authorisation vote to plan the way forward, renewing the struggle for a shorter working week abandoned by Dempsey.

This requires forming rank-and-file committees to link up all grades across London Underground, appealing to ASLEF train operators to oppose their leadership and join a united struggle.

The claim that there is no money for a genuine shorter working week must be rejected. A government subsidy for Transport for London’s day-to-day running costs was withdrawn in 2018, made up for with passenger revenue from the highest fares of any metro system in the world.

Meanwhile, the government makes billions available for the military and keeps taxes on the super rich and the corporations minimal. The UK’s 157 billionaires collectively own £670 billion, much of it flowing from financial operations in the banks and boardrooms of London—a city which embodies the divide between those who produce wealth and those who live off it.



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