

# London Underground train operators strike against productivity-driven four-day week

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Around 1,800 train operator members of the Rail, Maritime Transport workers union (RMT) brought large sections of the London Underground network to a halt on Tuesday with a second walk out to take place on Thursday.

The strike action is against Transport for London's (TfL) implementation of a compressed four day week (4DW). The reduction from five days is being used to overhaul hard-won terms and conditions and lifts the cap on the maximum hours of a duty from 8.5 to 10 hours.

The strike took place despite the best efforts of the RMT led by general secretary Eddie Dempsey. Backroom talks with management broke down Monday after five hours at the arbitration service ACAS.

TfL had not budged on its plans. The talks have revolved around the definition of what constitutes a "voluntary" implementation aimed at demobilising opposition.

Dempsey called off previous strikes in April and most recently on May 19 and 21, claiming TfL had "shifted its position" allowing for the union to "explore" train operators concerns over fatigue, safety and new rosters. As the WSWs stated:

"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.'"

After another month of negotiations and a further round of ACAS talks, TfL is escalating their assault.

TfL has been able to call upon the ASLEF union leadership as its PR department, spinning the changes as an unqualified gain for workers to silence opposition to the lengthening of the working day, risking their safety and that of the public.

ASLEF, which represents around half of all drivers, ensured that much of London Underground's network was kept running.

TfL's compressed four day week, if implemented, will be felt for many years in unending attacks, job losses and productivity drives. Operators have only been given a briefing of a much more substantial proposal. Just a few

stand out points from the briefing paper:

- \* Shift lengths will rise from 8.45 hours up to 10 hours.

- \* Operators shift will begin when they step on trains and finish when they step off their last train, losing booking on and time used to read safety notices, get their equipment and walking time to the train.

- \* A significant increase in weekend work.

- \* The introduction of a two-hour movement on Spare cover turns, meaning if your spare turn start time is 14.00, with one day notice (and in certain circumstances less than that), you can be asked to book on at 12 noon or 16.00.

- \* Rest day patterns on the four-day week will increasingly be rostered to suit the company, again leading to a significant increase in weekend work.

- \* Operators will be issued a compulsory Personal Electronic Tablet to manage their jobs, including allocated shifts changes, posting safety notices, etc.

It is a productivity drive overseen by Labour's London Mayor Sadiq Khan, dressed up in the language of work-life balance.

## What Jared Wood said—and what it means

The RMT was forced to sanction Tuesday's strikes because opposition among train operators is becoming more intransigent and TfL refused even minor concessions that could have been used to agree a third cancellation of planned strikes.

RMT London Transport Regional Organiser Jared Wood, a leading member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, said on BBC Essex on Monday that the union did not want strike action. He repeatedly called for "a sensible discussion" and negotiations over "the terms of changes to working conditions."

Wood complained that TfL had not explained what "voluntary" participation would mean and management

were asking the union to help implement the arrangements before clarifying how “voluntary” they were. Voluntary opt out of the four-day week is a fraud directed at dividing the workforce. Even if TfL create a roster for the drivers opposed to the deal, it entrenches division in the depots and those workers will face a war of attrition.

These are not the arguments of a union fighting to defeat TfL’s attack, but rather the objections of a bureaucracy angling for a supervisory role in rolling it out. According to the *Times*, management has now proposed to the union an “oversight board” to manage the introduction of the four-day week. The same report confirmed “regardless of the strike, the new four-day voluntary rota will be trialled on the Bakerloo Line this year.”

Three weeks after the RMT claimed TfL had shifted its position, management is proceeding with the framework of implementation.

### **ASLEF’s role and the media coverage**

TfL’s confidence to push ahead rests on ASLEF, which accepted the four-day week in April. ASLEF’s full-time London Underground official Finn Brennan dismissed objection as “a campaign of disinformation and distortion by those who want to prevent drivers having improved working conditions.”

Just over half of ASLEF’s membership voted to accept TfL’s proposals. This was obtained by suppressing scrutiny of what the deal contained. The *Times* reported that ASLEF characterised the RMT-led strikes as “the ‘only time in history [a union] has struck over higher pay and less work’”.

During Tuesday’s strike over half of drivers were forced to work because of ASLEF’s position. Operators used to honour each other’s picket line. The RMT made no appeal to rank-and-file ASLEF members to join the strikes, reflecting the corporatist framework within which both bureaucracies operate.

Last September, around 10,000 London Underground workers—train operators, station staff, engineers and signalling workers—took part in a week-long strike over pay and a shorter working week before it was shut down by the Dempsey led apparatus without a membership ballot.

Dempsey and the union executive have excluded station staff, engineers and signalling workers from the dispute of train operators despite facing the same threats. Both TfL and the RMT have stressed that negotiations will continue beyond this week’s strikes.

### **Train operators must take the initiative**

The RMT cancelled strikes in March, again in May, and is now conducting a two-day stoppage with the dispute deliberately narrowed and the workforce divided. The WSWS warned in March and again in May that Dempsey was preparing a sellout:

- Train operators must demand full access to all negotiating documents and insist that no agreement be put to members that has been drafted behind closed doors with TfL officials.
- The Bakerloo line trial of TfL proposals must be boycotted.
- The resumption of joint action by all
- Rank-and-file committees must be created to unite all grades in a common struggle.
- A direct appeal to ASLEF members, over the heads of the bureaucracy, to join the fight.

The argument that TfL has no money for a genuine shorter working week is nonsense. The government subsidy for TfL’s day-to-day operations was withdrawn in 2018 and replaced by passenger revenues, imposing on the travelling public the highest fares of any metro system on the planet. Dempsey boasted about the unions role in Underground workers’ generating a £166 million surplus—on a network employing 2,000 fewer workers.

This is just one of the rotten fruits of both unions’ alliance with the right-wing Starmer led Labour government and his henchman in the capital, Khan, enforcing these productivity drives while spending enormous sums on expanding the military and participation in barbaric wars.



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