Eight days of London Underground strikes against productivity driven four-day week

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23 November 2026

Around 1,800 London Underground train operators in the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) are preparing eight 24-hour rolling strikes between November 26, 2026 and February 25, 2027, opposing Transport for London's (TfL) imposition of a four-day week. The action was announced November 6.

Train operators struck in April and June. In August they renewed their mandate with an 89 percent vote on a 61 percent turnout. The dispute exposes TfL's determination, under Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan, to restructure the workforce. Rather than a straightforward shorter week, TfL's planned reduction from roughly 38.5 to 34 hours compresses those hours into longer shifts, lifting the cap on maximum hours and risking fatigue and passenger safety.

An RMT statement said drivers face "longer duties, earlier starts and later finishes, short notice changes to shifts and attacks on existing transfer rights and annual leave arrangements." Those refusing the framework "could also face displacement from their current depots," paving the way for "hundreds of job cuts."

While train operators have demanded further strike action, the RMT has agreed last-ditch talks with management at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) Tuesday, two days before the first walkout on November 26.

Despite declaring that members are being asked to "surrender agreements that have been negotiated and defended over many years," RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey has repeatedly suspended strikes and negotiated over the implementation of management's framework.

There is every possibility he will suspend action again without members authorisation. This poses the need for the rank-and-file to establish control of the dispute, formulate their own demands, and reach out to RMT members across London Underground for a genuine shorter working week with no detriment to jobs, terms and conditions.

A "shorter week" with longer hours

The compressed working week is part of TfL's plans to cut the workforce by 10 percent under its "Train Modernisation Plan".

Under TfL's compressed working week, maximum shift lengths can increase from 8 hours 45 minutes to up to 10 hours. Shifts would be counted only from boarding the first train to leaving the last: paid time for booking on, collecting equipment and reading safety notices would be removed. Longer duties and reduced breaks will increase pressure on drivers in a safety-critical occupation. Research has shown existing shift patterns cut life expectancy by up to ten years—the compressed working week will increase exhaustion.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) interviewed drivers about their concerns. As one driver explained the "step of time" that breaks up non-stop driving could disappear. "On Sunday, there is no 'step of time.' With this deal, it will be like Sunday all the time. Non-stop driving with only the basic break."

The RMT's record of demobilisation

In March, Dempsey cancelled the first two walk outs of 6 days of stoppages after claiming TfL had "taken steps in the right direction," without explaining what had changed in management's stance, overriding a 91 percent strike mandate. After two stoppages in April and on June 2 and 4, further action was suspended to hold talks. Press reports said management proposed an "oversight board" to manage the rollout, giving the union a supervisory role over the changes it claimed to oppose.

The central issue was shifted from demanding withdrawal of management's four-day-week model towards negotiating the terms of its implementation. RMT London Transport Regional Organiser Jared Wood, of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, summed up the RMT stance early in the dispute, calling for "a sensible discussion" over "the terms of changes to working conditions." These are not the arguments of a union fighting to defeat TfL's attack, but the objections of union bureaucrats angling for a supervisory role in rolling it out.

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In September 2025, some 10,000 Underground workers, including train operators, struck for a week for a pay rise and a reduced working week from 35 to 32 hours. Dempsey and the executive foisted on members a sellout deal without a ballot. The derisory 3.4 percent pay increase rejected by members was repackaged as a part of a three-year deal and the demand for a shorter week dropped, leaving train operators to confront TfL alone.

ASLEF leaders back management's framework

The leaders of the train driver's union, ASLEF, have been the right hand of management. In April 2025, its leadership secured acceptance of TfL's compressed working week, with 70 percent support among votes cast on an 80 percent turnout—just over half of union members. Finn Brennan, ASLEF's organiser on the London Underground, dismissed opposition as "disinformation and distortion". This was a smear against members to shut down discussion over concerns around longer shifts and possible job losses. He told the *Guardian* that the RMT strikes marked "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."

ASLEF agreed to a four-day week and only then began discussing its details. Drivers told the WSWS they had voted against the deal and were leaving the union. "I'm fearful of the shift lengths. I went on strike with the RMT drivers, and I am leaving ASLEF." The RMT has made no appeal to ASLEF members for a joint struggle against their leadership's refusal to address their concerns, as this would cut across the accommodation they are seeking with TfL management and the Labour government.

The attack on Underground workers is part of a wider programme of austerity imposed on public services. The central government operating grant for TfL was withdrawn in 2018, with funding for day-to-day running imposed on the travelling public—the highest fares for any metro system in the world.

The claim that there is no money for a shorter working week without loss of jobs, terms and conditions is a lie. The resources exist to provide safe, affordable and properly staffed public transport. Instead, the Labour government is escalating military expenditure and supporting Britain's participation in wars from Gaza and Ukraine to Iran, while insisting that public services and workers accept "fiscal restraint." Meanwhile, Britain's 157 billionaires collectively possess £670 billion, according to the 2026 *Sunday Times* Rich List.

Dempsey boasted that TfL produced a £166 million surplus in 2024/5 with 2,000 fewer staff on London Underground and ridership close to pre-Covid levels—conditions the RMT had, in his own words, "helped deliver." 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 of "progress".

Build rank-and-file committees to take control

Train operators cannot entrust the defence of their conditions to a bureaucracy that has repeatedly cancelled action and negotiated behind closed doors with management. The renewed strikes must become the starting point for a fundamentally different strategy.

Drivers must take control of their strike mandate, so that action cannot be called off without their say. Any proposed settlement must be debated and decided by the membership at mass meetings of the rank and file beforehand.

Rank-and-file committees must be established independently of the union apparatus, bringing together drivers, station staff, engineers and signalling workers across London Underground. These committees should coordinate industrial action and organise a boycott of the Bakerloo line trial.

An appeal must be made directly to ASLEF members for united action. The demand must be for a genuinely shorter working week, with no loss of pay, no compulsory extension of shifts, no job cuts and no deterioration in safety or working conditions.

The defence of London Underground workers' conditions is inseparable from the fight for properly funded, affordable public transport against the priorities of corporate profit and war. This raises the need for a political fight against the austerity and militarist programme of the Burnham Labour government and the financial aristocracy it serves.



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