London Underground train drivers strike to defend terms and conditions against fraud of shorter working week

By Tony Robson
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Train drivers on London Underground took part in 24-hour strike action from midday on November 26 against the plans for a compressed four-day week by Transport for London (TfL), overseen by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

The 1,800 members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) voted by 89 percent majority on a 61 percent turnout to renew strike action in August. It follows one day stoppages earlier this year in April and June. Train drivers insist the planned reduction from 38.5 to 34 hours a week is not a genuine shorter working week but a Trojan horse to implement longer hours, with the maximum cap on shifts lifted to 10 hours. It would also overhaul other terms and conditions as TfL plans hundreds of job losses.

Thursday's walk-out is the first of a further seven days of rolling strikes planned leading up to Christmas and into the New Year with the final one-day strike on February 25.

A last-ditch attempt to avert strike action between the RMT and management at arbitration talks on Tuesday failed. TfL proposed train drivers could opt out of the compressed working week and remain at their depots but this means being placed in a pool system for five years with only a minimum of 24 hours' notice of a change of shift. The third "option" was to remain on a five-day week over 36 hours on the new terms, with longer driving times and earlier and later finishes.

Eddie Dempsey, RMT general secretary stated the "RMT has already suspended strike action three times for talks, yet no real improvements have been forthcoming.

"There is nothing voluntary about a scheme that forces drivers to give up existing protections whether they work four days or five and threatens those who refuse with displacement from their depots."

Dempsey and the union executive went over the heads of members to veto strike action during the spring/summer walk outs claiming progress with management which he now concedes amounted to nothing. The entirely disjointed action which went ahead was intended to demobilise opposition with the issue buried in closed door talks since June. Dempsey states there is nothing voluntary about the carve-up of workers hard won terms and conditions, but the RMT has restricted train drivers' opposition to seeking worthless assurances that they can opt out of the compressed working week with no detriment rather than demanding the complete withdrawal of the plans.

The renewed strike action by train drivers shows the determination to fight the imposition of the compressed working week. This cannot be entrusted to the RMT leadership which has handed the initiative to TfL and the Labour Mayor. Dempsey shut down strike action by 10,000 RMT members—including drivers—across London Underground after a week of rolling strike action last September. This was to demand a shorter working week and a pay rise. It was ended bureaucratically without a ballot with no resolution of the demand for a shorter working week. The 3.4 percent award already rejected by members as a real terms pay cut was repackaged as part of a three-year deal with the subsequent two years linked to the RPI inflation measure.

On November 26, Dempsey posted a video renewing his call for a "summit" with the Mayor, whom he accused of "presiding over a complete dog's breakfast of industrial relations." Dempsey cited the Trades Union Congress's backing for his intervention. The video lays bare his real attitude: he treats the militancy of his own members as a problem to be overcome, while casting the Labour Party's local henchman—the very man spearheading the attacks—as

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a would-be saviour.

The 24-hour strike which started Thursday and ended at noon today caused the partial or full suspension of six of the 11 lines on London Underground and severe delays elsewhere across the network.

The impact of the walkout by RMT train drivers was mitigated because ASLEF, the other main union for around half of London Underground drivers, did not participate. ASLEF's leadership has played a politically corrupt role in backing TfL's restructuring which it has spun as a gain for its members without strings.

The vote to accept the compressed working week in the ASLEF ballot in April 2025 was bureaucratically enforced by shutting down an open debate and any scrutiny of its contents. ASLEF organiser Finn Brennan branded opposition "disinformation and distortion" to cast concerns over longer shifts, fatigue and job losses by members as illegitimate. Despite this campaign, 30 percent of ASLEF members voted against. Combined with the rejection votes of the changes by RMT members, this shows a clear majority of drivers across the Underground voted against the deal.

The sweetheart deal by ASLEF leaders is the bureaucracy's model for a working partnership with Labour. Brennan sought to discredit the RMT drivers' dispute, declaring: "A strike designed to stop people having the choice of a shorter working week and more time off is a strange choice to make." His remarks have been routinely quoted in the right-wing media frenzy against the strike.

The unified struggle of all London Underground workers that is required to defeat TfL and the Labour Mayor can only be built from below. This means establishing rank-and-file committees to co-ordinate the struggle of drivers, station staff, control room, signalling and maintenance workers against the divisions sown from above by both ASLEF and the RMT.

An entirely different industrial and political strategy is needed with decision making transferred to the shopfloor to wage an uncompromising fight, not to appease management and TfL executives, and linked to the fight for a fully funded and affordable transport system.

Dempsey has not outlined the RMT's policy for achieving a shorter working week with no detriment to London Underground workers. Instead, he has pointed to the £166 million surplus TfL has been able to run up with Underground stations manned by 2,000 fewer staff which he boasted the RMT "helped deliver."

The ability of Dempsey to posture as a left, militant leader, while in practice collaborating with cuts and the demobilisation of strikes, has been undermined because the essential conflict now emerging is between the working class and Labour.

This opposition must be provided with a perspective to wage the fight RMT leaders are not prepared to conduct in the name of preserving their partnership with Labour at local and national level.

London Underground has been transformed into a profit-making operation. The Labour government has maintained the withdrawal of the central grant for day-to-day operations introduced by the Tories in 2018. The costs have been absorbed by the highest fares of a metro system in the world and sacrificing London Underground workers' jobs, pay and conditions. While London Underground is starved of funding and investment because of the tax concessions to big business, the Burnham government finds billions more for rearmament and war against Russia in Ukraine and continued support for the Gaza genocide and US-Israeli aggression against Iran.

The fight for a shorter working week with no loss of pay and a fully funded, affordable public transport system requires breaking the stranglehold of private profit and placing transport under public ownership and democratic workers' control. This means expropriating the major corporations and financial interests that monopolise economic resources and redirecting them towards social need. This programme can only be achieved through the independent political mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme.



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