Striking London Underground train drivers explain the facts, not fiction, of the four-day week plans

By our reporters
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"It's about headcount reduction; they want to reduce costs."

London Underground train drivers on the picket line have been speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) about the content of the plans for a four-day week by Transport for London overseen by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

Rather than improving their lives the "cost-neutral" measures by Transport for London (TfL) management and the Labour mayor are a historic attack on their hard-won rights. Working existing shift patterns already reduces life expectancy among London Underground workers by 10 years – the plans involve even more extreme shifts.

On Thursday, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT) took part in the first 24 hour strike of seven more one-day stoppages up to next February against TfL's compressed working week.

Despite an 89 percent vote to renew strike action in August - after walkouts in April and June - the RMT did not make an announcement of picket lines by train drivers which could be joined by those supporting them. Only a handful of picket lines were reported including at Brixton, Arnos Grove and Hainault.

Train drivers were denied the opportunity to make a broader appeal to workers for support to cut through the barrage of hostility by the media claiming the strike had no valid purpose and presenting TfL's plans for a four-day week as a godsend to workers from management.

On the picket at the Acton Town train depot in west London driver Maria described the issues at stake: "We're not fighting a four-day week. We are fighting the change to our terms and conditions that we have fought for over decades."

Maria explained the impact the changes would have, "At the moment our earliest start is 4:40 in the morning, our latest finish is 1:30. They're now changing those so 3:30 in the morning would be our earliest start and 2:30 in the morning would be our latest finish. We already have quite extreme shifts and not a great work-life balance now. If this was to come in, I don't know how we would survive, honestly.

"There's not one thing for me personally that's in this new framework that's better than what we have now, whether it's a four-day week or not. That extra rest day will purely be used for us to try and recover. It will hit us so hard, it will have a drastic effect on safety as well for passengers. It's just unworkable."

The maximum shift length is to be raised from 8 hours 45 minutes up to 10 hours. For Maria, "I work one week of early shifts and one week of lates, so when I'm on earlies I see my children after work, and when I'm on lates I see them after school. With 10-hour shifts, I just wouldn't see them."

TfL claimed that adopting the new framework would be voluntary, but "we said from the beginning, how can it be voluntary? … It's impossible for it to be voluntary. The company maintained that 'No, it will be voluntary. We don't know how, but it will be voluntary.'"

Drivers had been told they could stay on their existing conditions if they moved to a different depot, but "Many of us spend years on the waiting lists to get to the right depot. At Upminster the waiting list is about 10 years, how are you going to move someone there? You then spend years on the waiting list to get the right shifts, you plan your whole life around those shifts."

She added, "It impacts passengers directly due to safety if we are overworked, fatigued, coming into work an hour earlier. Driving trains in London requires a lot of concentration. It's not like you have a long distance between stations where you zone out, you're stopping all

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the time, we've got crowded platforms, narrow gaps."

Ultimately, "it's about headcount reduction, they want to reduce costs."

Maria had been following the protests in Europe, "For people of my generation, millennials, we've got two parties (Labour and Conservative) here that have been no different. And we're not putting up with it anymore." She pointed to a walkout by French workers on the Eurostar the day before, and expressed her international solidarity, "In our branch we support workers all around the world."

Another striking train driver, Stephen, told the WSWS "What we want is a genuine actual cut in hours at work. We want better work-life balance. But instead, what we're being offered is basically increased flexibility for the employer at the sacrifice of the kind of hours we need.

"We're already doing shift work. We've already got very unsocial hours. We can finish at 1:30 in the morning, start at 4:30 in the morning. They want us to get to work up to 2:45 in the morning, and to then start again at 3:45, so it's a massive increase in the parameters. It's unsafe for the people that will be using the trains to get us to do that."

He warned, "If they start with our grade and it's successful, then they'll just move it on. So, it's not just going to affect train drivers ultimately. It's something they'd like to roll out across TfL."

Stephen also rejected claims the new framework was voluntary, "The company says it's voluntary, and at the same time they say that if you don't sign up to it then you're almost certainly going to be displaced from the depot of your choice, and you'll have to just do suitable alternative train work. So it's not voluntary. The 'voluntary' aspect is to say 'either you accept our deal or you get something that's even worse than the deal we're offering you.'"

Another planned change is that "all the stuff outside of driving, all those hours will be taken away. Their aim is to get you to book on with an iPad, do away with the physical booking on procedure. Part of the physical booking on procedure is that you're seen by someone, they can talk to you if you've got an issue. That's somewhere that you can raise that you might not be fit to drive for whatever reason.

"How they're going to assess that sort of thing, fatigue and other things. It's all about fewer people doing the jobs. We're not against the move to technology, but when it's at the expense of our working conditions then we must object to it."

London Underground claims it needs to make savings, but while "it's true, there isn't the money currently invested in the Tube, but as you well know, there is the money in society, it's just about how it's distributed. So it's not in the control of London Underground, it's not in the control of us who are working there. That money is being hoarded away from the essential services. And if we had that money, then you'd have a service that's actually fit for purpose, at the moment you've basically got managed decline because of that lack of funding."

After the latest arbitration talks failed, "the negotiations clearly haven't got us anywhere. What we need to do is to strike to win concessions, not strike for talks. I think that's the lesson. That's the lesson that we must take from that."

He added, "We must unite across the entire workforce here. But we have a situation where the ASLEF leadership are in favour of the deal, and the RMT aren't, and the majority of drivers on the Piccadilly line are in the RMT.

"So, no, most ASLEF members will not come in today, they will not cross these picket lines, at least at this depot. That's the level of solidarity that's being shown by that rank and file."

As part of the discussion the WSWS team circulated the leaflet explaining that ASLEF leaders rammed through their agreement on the compressed working week last year while blocking any discussion among its members on the strings attached. This was grounds for a joint struggle with ASLEF train drivers, but RMT leader Eddie Dempsey has not criticised the sellout, a warning he is seeking his own accommodation with TfL and the Labour Mayor.

As it states "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.

"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."

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