

London trains shut down in rail worker strike

By our reporters
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British rail workers took part in a strikes yesterday, after massive votes in favour in three separate disputes—on the London Underground (LU) subway network and Great Western Railways, which serves the west of England and South Wales. Some 81 percent of LU drivers turned out in a vote that approved strike action by 98 percent. The whole London network was at a standstill, the first time since 2002 and services to the west were suspended on many lines, with just one train per hour between London and Bristol.

Industrial action is also likely at other train companies. Hundreds of engineers on Southern Rail are due to strike for five days from July 12, following a nine-to-one vote, and Northern Rail workers have voted by four-to-one to strike over a number of issues including the threat to ticket office and guard jobs and the introduction of zero-hour contracts.

For the first time in many years, the one-day LU strike involved around 20,000 station staff, drivers and managers belonging to the four main rail unions, the drivers' union Aslef, the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) and Unite. They were protesting against job cuts, ticket office closures and the introduction of a Night Tube service on five lines from September.

LU management had offered a measly pay increase in 2016-17 in line with the Retail Price Index, or 1 percent, whichever is greater. It has sought to split the workforce by offering a £500 [\$US767] launch bonus to all staff on the Night Tube lines, plus a one-off £2,000 bonus for drivers working at night on the five lines. The bonus would be paid to only 1,000 Tube workers out of a 20,000 strong workforce, and enable LU to avoid paying further income-based pensions contributions for its workforce. In addition, LU plans to hire 137 more drivers to work on the Night Tube on night-work contracts with lower pay and pensions and worse working conditions.

London Mayor Boris Johnson made it clear he will press ahead with the attacks on rail workers, declaring, “One way or the other I am afraid we must get on with modernisation and improvement to the Tube. I’ve said that we are going to have driverless trains and we will have driverless trains, I’ve said that we will reform the ticket offices and we have ... and we’ll get on with the Night Tube as well.”

Aslef LU organiser Finn Brennan complained that management had “squandered the window of opportunity to resolve this dispute by refusing to move their position in the slightest for three months and then demanding that all four trade unions accept an offer in one afternoon.” He went on to reassure that, “We will be ready to return to the negotiating table on Friday morning to ensure that further action can be avoided.”

RMT senior assistant general secretary, Steve Hedley, made it clear the union was not opposed to night-time working, saying, “We are all for the night Tube and we understand it’s going to help the city, but we do need adequate staffing and they need to stop this crazy proposal to close all the ticket offices.”

The ticket office closure programme has been the subject of bitter opposition by Tube workers, which the unions have systematically sold out. Already over 30 offices have closed and by the end of this year, the rest will have gone, involving the loss of over 1,000 jobs. LU management plans to turn the newly freed space into shops to boost revenue, in line with the Hong Kong Metro, which has vast shopping centres around its stations to increase profits.

In a separate dispute, rail workers at First Great Western also went out on a 48-hour strike over the introduction of Super Express Trains. The unions are “seeking the following assurances from management... To keep a safety competent guard on every train, to keep safety critical station Despatch staff, to keep buffet car facilities on every train, to ensure that the

maintenance of new rolling stock remains in-house [and] no job losses.”

It comes after the trade union bureaucracy called off a strike on the national railways in June after last-minute negotiations. This time the rail union bureaucrats, unable to reach a deal with the government-appointed arbitration service ACAS and repeat this betrayal so openly, sanctioned a strike as a means of allowing their members to let off steam.

The rail unions have limited unified action. Workers in other London rail services, including London Overground, the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), Transport for London (TfL) Rail and tram services, are not on strike even though night services will be extended to these lines in the future. Instead, they have organised staggered strikes, limiting it to 24 hours in LU and 48 hours on the First Great Western Service.

Following the disastrous failure of the Labour government’s £30 billion Public Private Partnerships supposedly aimed at modernising London’s Tube network, LU has sought to recoup the cost by outsourcing, increasing the number of passengers and fares to a level far higher than anywhere in Europe, and reducing the cost per passenger journey.

The last few years have seen a massive rise in productivity on LU following an agreement in 2008 with the unions over the introduction of stringent disciplinary procedures. In its annual report, comparing LU’s performance against international benchmarks, LU reported a 16 percent productivity increase over the year 2014-15, compared with an 11 percent increase in 2013-14, while pay fell in real terms.

This had a huge impact on workers’ health, highlighted by the cases of two drivers on the Northern and District lines who died of septicaemia from tooth infections due to having insufficient time off for dental treatment.

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