

Tube drivers shut down London Piccadilly Line

By Ross Mitchell
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On Wednesday about 400 Tube drivers on London Underground's Piccadilly Line struck over management attacks on their contract conditions. The 24-hour strike began at 9 p.m. and was called by the ASLEF and Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) trade unions.

The strike had a major impact, with no trains running, as it shut down the entire Piccadilly Line service. The Piccadilly Line transports some 600,000 passengers a day and is the only underground service to London's main Heathrow Airport.

The dispute began with management putting in place station supervisors at depots along the line to oversee drivers clocking in. It is a safety critical task as drivers take their instructions from duty trains staff managers to carry on working, without breaking their safety obligations. Due to staff shortages, station supervisors and middle management jobs are being informally merged as part of the management productivity drive.

This push to do away with agreed work practices by management and supervisors led drivers to ballot the unions for strike action.

Two further strikes are scheduled for April 19 and April 21 but the RMT and ASLEF are working to keep any stoppages isolated and localised to the Piccadilly Line. The District Line that runs parallel alongside the Piccadilly Line from Ealing Common to Barons Court station ran as normal during the strike, as did all other Underground lines. Station staff were not called on by the RMT to support striking drivers, though the union has its majority of members on stations.

In an attempt to undermine the strike and incite opposition to it, the line manager of the Piccadilly Line, Tony Matthews, issued a public letter to drivers dated March 24. He wrote, "Those of you who are members of the RMT or ASLEF are being asked to take strike

action this evening and tomorrow—action that will cost you money and seriously disrupt the plans of thousands of people trying to get home or away on holiday for their Easter Break".

Another action "short of a strike" was planned over the Easter weekend starting Friday. This is confined to just one depot, Oakwood, near Oakwood station at the east end of the line in London. Tube drivers will work as normal on the other line depots, which are much larger than Oakwood. These main depots are Arnos Grove, Cockfosters, Northfields and Acton Bollo House, all near the stations of the same name.

The dispute is another demonstration of how the rail unions direct workers' militancy into limited protests, while using it as a means to strengthen their relations with management by proving they are needed to impose attacks.

In the run-up to the stoppage, the RMT did everything possible to get the strike off the agenda and resolve what it described as an "industrial relations crisis". In a March 9 official circular (LUL Ref 14/2), the RMT stated, "An avoidance of dispute meeting took place with the Company last week but regrettably, management failed to address our main concerns over the abuse of the disciplinary process and the breaches of our agreements."

The union added that it had asked "for a weekly line meeting to be chaired by the General Manager to *address the industrial relations crisis* on the Piccadilly Line" but had been rebuffed (emphasis added).

Hours before the strike began, RMT General Secretary Mick Cash wrote in a circular to Piccadilly Line Train Operators, "I can confirm that eleventh hour talks between your union and management have now broken down without agreement; therefore this evening's strike action on the Piccadilly Line will go

ahead. *The union had entered into these talks in faith in a last ditch attempt to resolve the dispute;* however a hostile and confrontational attitude by LUL has now corroded the negotiating process” (emphasis added).

The RMT has a long record of sabotaging strikes on the Underground and nationally. Although it was unable to prevent the Piccadilly Line action going ahead, on the same day Cash wrote in an another circular, to High Output System Operators employed at Network Rail, that a planned strike during Easter over pay and contractual conditions had been suspended. Cash said the union’s National Executive Committee “has taken the decision to suspend all industrial action to allow further talks to take place” on revised management proposals.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed some of the workers, under anonymity, involved in the Piccadilly Line dispute.

One has been a driver for eight years and explained, “There is a lot of anger over the past years. We drivers are at the bottom of the food chain when it comes to management punishing or sacking us for any little thing that goes wrong. These 1973-built trains have developed a history of serious safety defects such as opening doors on the wrong side at Heathrow station.

“Driver disciplinary procedures were put in place by management with the collaboration of the trade unions. The new disciplinary regime is completely skewed in favour of management with the help of the unions so as to instil fear in us”, he continued.

“We are not striking about the money”, said another who has five years on the job. “We do it to defend our gains in the framework agreements that were hard won in the late 1990s. But the unions have allowed the employment of younger workers on different contracts and benefits which are worse off than the rest of us and undermine us all. By this the unions pit workers against workers”, he said. “That’s disgusting.”

“It is one rule for them and another rule for us”, he added. “Even the right to free speech to the public by Tube workers has been severely curtailed by the unions, to assist management with severe punishment against whistleblowing”.

The closure of all 268 Underground ticket offices at the start of this year, with the collaboration of the trade unions, has further emboldened management to

accelerate its offensive against Tube workers.

The disregard for established contractual procedures is part of the push for a productivity drive by management so as to further undermine and casualise Tube workers’ conditions in a climate of relentless austerity. The removal of the driver grade through the introduction of automated trains on all the lines is the next stage of Tube management’s agenda. In this they secured the collaboration of the trade unions as far back as 2011.

Furthermore, with the implementation of the night Tube in 2017, the operating costs of the Tube will be driven down further as more passengers travel during extended night running over Friday and Saturday. This will increase passenger ridership and productivity, thus bringing operating costs down further and profits ever higher to the detriment of workers’ health.

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