RMT union cancels three strikes on London Underground

By Angela Austin
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On December 20, the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) cancelled three scheduled strikes on London's Underground (LU).

A 24-hour stoppage on the Central Line, scheduled to start at 8 a.m. the following day in defence of a sacked driver, was called off. A strike on the same line over a "breakdown of industrial relations," which would have affected services on December 21/22, was also called off. Also cancelled was a strike on the Bakerloo Line, scheduled for Boxing Day (December 26).

The suspended strikes were supported by workers in ballots, expressing a desire to fight worsening working conditions, staff shortages and victimisations. Management has ridden roughshod over rules and procedures, as laid out by the Framework Agreement drawn up following a series of struggles in 1989.

The dispute on the Bakerloo Line is over LU management's failure to ensure shift coverage in line with previous commitments. The RMT said "significant progress" had been made to allow talks to resume. But no official document describing any progress has been made public by the union.

On the Central Line, workers were to strike in defence of a sacked driver, whose fight for reinstatement stretches over 10 months since his dismissal. The RMT claimed the company "left it up right to the wire before submitting important new evidence into the talks process" and "accuses LU of ten months of mismanagement that provoked disruption and discontent."

In recent months, Underground workers have been involved in a series of disputes and strikes. The RMT was desperate to avoid a repetition over the holiday period of the 24-hour strike on November 8 by its members and members of the drivers' union, ASLEF, on the Central Line. They struck in defence of a sacked driver, with the stoppage affecting 800,000 commuters and bringing much of London to a halt. The RMT weakened the strike by cancelling industrial action due to take place the same day on the Piccadilly Line that serves Heathrow Airport.

London Underground and parent company of the London Transit Authority, Transport for London (TfL), are undergoing major restructuring centred on profit accumulation. Since the Labour government's public bailout Public Private Partnership on the Tube was carried out in 2001, the RMT and ASLEF have intensified their collaboration with management. They have worked under successive governments as stakeholders with both London Underground and TfL in implementing demands for more profit to be extracted from workers, via job losses and productivity hikes. Central to this was their collaboration in the closure of all 265 London Underground ticket offices.

The aim is to bring operations into line with international transport systems, such as Hong Kong and Singapore Metros corporations (HKMTR and SMRT), which are listed on Asian stock markets. London Underground's Elizabeth Line is characteristic of this process. The newly-built 60-mile line, oriented west to east, joins both ends of London and will carry 200 million passengers next year.

The Aberdeen Standard Investment (ASI) hedge fund is backing the £971 million bid to acquire the fleet of the 70 trains comprising the Elizabeth Line from TfL. ASI is also investing in the UK-based transnational rolling stock infrastructure company, Rock Rail—the latter putting in £4.9 million through the re-investment of the success fee. The remaining £819 million will be raised via a long-term debt issue. This will be paid back by the exploitation of TfL workers on the line and through passenger fares.

Since 2017, Rock Rail has taken financial interests in the Southwestern rail franchise, controlled by First Group and MTR, the Hong Kong headquartered public transport operator. Rock Rail is competing with financial investment firm Equitix for the TfL contract to run the Elizabeth Line.

This January, TfL sold its fully purchased trains on the Elizabeth Line to be leased back as a form of borrowing. This plan prompted Chair of the London Assembly's transport committee, Caroline Pidgeon, a Liberal Democrat, to ask, "You are going to be selling and leasing back rolling stock you have already got, that you wholly own, in order to give you the cash to buy new rolling stock? It sounds quite mad."

London Underground management is clamping down on pay, terms and conditions, and ramping up exploitation through increased monitoring of job performance. This is being measured by four main key performance indices: staff errors, Signals Past at Danger, attendance and sickness.

Meeting stringent performance targets that are measured daily on the TfL company Intranet website brings bonuses for management. This includes monitoring customer and staff injuries, excess journey times in minutes, operating surplus and staff attendance ratio.

For example, Period 10, Week 1, yields the following information on the TfL website: 130 customer and staff injuries; an excess journey time of 5.66 minutes on the whole TfL network (tram, tube, overground, local TfL rail, Docklands Light Railway); a staff attendance of 94.8 percent with a target for management bonuses at 96 percent, plus an operating surplus of £83.5 million.

Period 9, Week 4 yields the results: 110 customer and staff injuries, 5.66 minutes of excess journey time, £69.5 million in operating surplus and a staff attendance of 94.7 percent.

These indices demonstrate the monitoring of tube workers 24/7 365 days of the year by a Foxconn-style management seeking ever higher rates of profit. As a transnational corporation monitors its worldwide activities every instant from its headquarters, so does TfL management. On the same web page, its snapshot at 6 a.m. for December 20 shows that 283 out of 286 trains were in service. Successful snapshot figures all year around are essential to secure annual management bonuses, akin to shareholders dividends.

The latest derailment of struggles by the RMT on the Underground is of a piece with the unions' sabotage of the fight by rail workers against the spread of driver only operated (DOO) trains by the UK's privately-owned train operating companies. DOO threatens the loss of around 6,000 guards' jobs and jeopardises public safety. For over two years, the RMT has limited action to token regional, 24-hour strikes, while isolating—along with ASLEF—guards and drivers from one another.

The RMT has already sealed DOO deals with rail franchises at ScotRail and Greater Anglia. It has agreed to a sell-out deal "in principle" with Merseyrail and the Labour Party-led Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, whereby "door control and dispatch of the trains will transfer to the driver" on new trains. In June, the RMT agreed to a framework deal with West Midlands Trains specifying: "On such new or modified rolling stock, train drivers will operate the train doors and undertake train dispatch in normal circumstances ..."

These are the actions of organisations that represent the interests of management, not their members. To defend their terms and conditions and livelihoods, tube and rail workers must turn to the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. These must become the basis for a mobilisation of workers throughout public transport in a joint offensive to defend conditions and jobs and reverse the cuts that have devastated the right of all to a safe and affordable, not for profit, reliable public transport system.