

RMT and Aslef bureaucracy call off London Underground strikes: Rank and file must take control of pay fight

Micheal Barnes, Tony Robson
10 November 2024

The pulling of strike action between November 1-16 on London Underground (LU) by the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) and the Aslef drivers' union is an act of sabotage by union leaders against a renewed collective offensive by tube workers.

A major sellout is in the making behind closed doors in ongoing talks with Transport for London (TfL) officials on behalf of the London Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan. To defeat this the rank and file must assert its collective will against the bureaucracy to fight for an inflation busting pay rise and against the ongoing attack on jobs and pensions.

The lead role in the bureaucratic veto of mandated strike action by the RMT's 10,000 members on LU has been played by General Secretary Mick Lynch

The RMT executive called off the rolling strikes across different grades on London Underground between November 1-8--only hours before the first walkout by Engineering Vehicles Operational and Maintenance staff. The RMT press release trumpeted a "significantly improved offer" following "intense negotiations."

As a matter of principle it is down to RMT members to determine whether the revised offer met their pay demand having voted 96 percent in favour to strike.

The contents of the RMT circular signed by Lynch in fact confirms there had not been any actual change in the offer of 4.6 percent for 2024-5 and 1.6-2 percent for the year following. The "revised offer" is based exclusively on the claim that "all the issues surrounding pay banding are now off the table". This is a reference to the ultimatum introduced by TfL during the negotiations to reserve the right to decide unilaterally which pay grades it could exclude from a consolidated pay settlement. This temporary retreat, with nothing agreed, is based on reinstating the bureaucracy in the collective bargaining framework to directly suppress strike action.

The RMT is demobilising its members to ram through yet another substandard deal--as was the case for the delayed

pay award for 2023-4 following strike action after three days in January--aborted by Lynch and the union executive and implemented without a membership vote. In this instance there is no reference made by TfL to any additional money compared to the £30 million found by the Labour Mayor to enforce the marginally improved below inflation deal.

Lynch stated, "Your union's National Executive Committee has considered the matter and taken on board the views of your representatives that the offer as it stands is enough to suspend the industrial action." This assertion has been refuted by a statement by 100 RMT reps on LU, who met the day before on October 30 and agreed by a majority that the strikes should go ahead.

Taking advantage of the skulduggery by the RMT against its own members, TfL stated that Aslef should also pull strike action by its members. This was dutifully followed by Aslef officials on November 5 just ahead of strike action by tube drivers on November 7 and 12 which would have brought the network to a virtual standstill. The suspension was again taken above the heads of union members.

The *Evening Standard* November 8 reported that Aslef's Finn Brennan has accepted the existing pay offer of 3.8 percent in return for which Nick Dent, director of customer operations said in a letter to Aslef: "We have agreed to discuss how we could develop a roadmap towards a restructured working week in a separate forum, following the conclusion of this pay negotiation."

The RMT and Aslef are resorting to bureaucratic methods to prevent strikes by a powerful section of transport workers from providing a focus for pent up opposition to the Labour government's deepening agenda of austerity and war.

The role of the Socialist Party (SP) and its leading member Jared Wood--the RMT London Transport Regional Organiser--is to justify the sellout agreements and bureaucratic sabotage of LU workers struggle at every turn.

Wood used his official position to rubber stamp the rotten 2023-4 pay award of 5 percent plus lump sums, without a

members vote presenting the crumbs as “a significant increase”. He contradicted this claim only three weeks ago on LBC radio, stating it did not reach RPI inflation and that LU workers could not accept another “de facto pay cut.”

In the face of a repeat performance of the RMT executive jettisoning strike action, the SP posted a brief article designed to justify the bureaucratic veto in words identical to Lynch:

“The threat of a week of strike action has forced London Underground to drop its plans to withhold the full consolidated pay rise from some tube workers. The RMT union has suspended action to allow for further talks on the pay offer. Full report to follow.”

The *Socialist Worker* (SW) stepped in to boost the opposition by RMT reps, which has kept to the level of a token gesture. A November 5 article reported the statement issued by RMT reps on LU opposing the suspension of the strike--four days after the event!

What the SW cites from the statement is damning: “We are RMT London Underground reps and activists who oppose our leadership’s decision to suspend planned strikes.

“A reps’ meeting, held on 30 October and attended by over 100 people, produced a clear majority that strikes should proceed.

“The majority of the meeting was also clear that the latest offer did not come close enough to meeting key union demands.” These include “an above-inflation pay rise for all members” and “progress towards a reduced working week”.

It added, “The suspension of strikes took place without any improved offer being tabled.

“It was therefore in direct contravention of the wishes of a mass reps’ meeting, and makes a mockery of RMT’s democratic culture.”

Damning is the refusal by the RMT reps to rally union members against the sabotage and lies by Lynch and the union executive. This would have opened a different dynamic into the dispute in which the rank and file could assert its control. But even as RMT reps point to a sellout, this will not break up the cosy relations with TfL and Labour in the corporatist set up.

The RMT executive has separated the pay claim entirely from issues of “Jobs, Pensions and Agreements.” At the beginning of October, for the seventh time since December 2021, RMT members renewed a strike ballot to oppose attacks planned by LU management on jobs and pensions. TfL are finalising plans for a consultation on a major attack on pensions to be imposed in 2026. Other than a series of cancelled strikes, the only action under this ballot is non-cooperation with aspects of training.

The RMT pioneered this corporatist arrangement with Labour Mayor Khan. In the 2016 Mayoral election, Khan

pledged a target of “zero days of strikes.” In 2019, he bragged that this collaboration with the unions had in the first three years of his administration reduced strikes from 19,681 working days lost by individual employees in the last three years of Boris Johnson’s stint as London Mayor, to just 3,824.

On October 19 this year, Mayor Khan said confidently, “Earlier on this year, one of the trade unions was threatening a week’s worth of strikes--we resolved those amicably. In the spring, there were threats of strike action and we resolved those amicably. I’m hopeful and confident we’ll resolve these as well.”

The “amicable” resolution of the LU disputes is entirely in the interests of the financial and corporate oligarchy the Labour government represents. Rather than the confrontational approach of the Tories, this is reliant on the strike breaking role of the RMT sacrificing its members pay, jobs and conditions.

The WSWS warned LU workers that their pay fight could not be entrusted to Lynch and they faced a reckoning with the union bureaucracy over the sellout in February. This has been rapidly confirmed.

Rank and file control of the dispute is needed. LU workers should demand an end to any further closed-door negotiations and countermand the reinstatement of the mandated strike action for a non-negotiable pay rise.

As the WSWS article stated, “London Underground workers are not faced with simply an industrial struggle but a political fight. The Labour government already plans to make £22 billion of recurring cuts in public spending over the next four years. Spending on health, social needs and critical infrastructure is to be bled dry to fund the war escalation in Gaza, Lebanon and against Iran, as well as the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Starmer has promised to rip up regulations and guarantee corporate tax breaks to guarantee the profits of the corporate and financial oligarchy.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact