

## **RMT Strike Activity on London Underground: Incidence, Dynamics and Causes**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The London Underground is one of Britain's most strike-prone industries, with the threat and use of strike action by the National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) a persistent feature of industrial relations during the past 10-15 years. Thus on a number of occasions strikes have paralysed sections of the tube network, inconvenienced up to 3 million commuters and caused millions of pounds damage to London's economy. Not surprisingly such a combative approach has often been vilified by the popular media and Boris Johnson, the new Conservative Party Mayor of London (who defeated Labour incumbent Ken Livingstone in the May 2008 Greater London Assembly elections), for whom it is the union's 'hard-left' militant leaders who should be held entirely responsible for the high level of strike activity afflicting the Tube. Yet ironically the London Underground has been almost completely unexplored territory from within the field of industrial relations (apart from Darlington, 2001; 2007; 2009a; 2009b; London Assembly, 2006). This is remarkable considering the centrality of the tube network to the day-to-day functioning of the British economy and society, the evident importance of tube stations and depots as major workplaces in their own right, the relatively high level of strike action evident in recent years (in marked contrast to most other areas of employment), and the combative and left-wing form of trade unionism that the RMT has developed.

In attempting to fill the gap, this paper builds on some preliminary studies to provide the first-ever systematic examination of the dynamics of strike activity on the London Underground during the period 1995-2008, examining the conditions, issues and causes that have given rise to conflict. In particular the paper explores the extent to which union leadership, notably left-wing activists at every level of the union, have been an important contributory catalyst, symptom and beneficiary of strike activity relative to other variables. In the process it subjects the populist 'agitator theory' of strikes - which alleges 'left-wing militants' are the *cause* and *organising force* behind much industrial unrest - to critical investigation. It does so by examining the importance of circumstance and contingency to strike propensity on the Underground, as well as by drawing on mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998; McAdam, 1988; Tilly, 1978). Methods of data collection include extensive tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with a range of RMT informants at every level of the union, as well as senior HR managers; analysis of documentary industrial relations and trade union material; and personal fieldwork observation. After a brief outline of the context of employment within the London Underground, the paper documents the incidence and character of strike activity and provides a multi-dimensional explanation for such strike activity. It concludes with some wider generalisations concerned with the relationship between strike mobilisation, left-wing leadership and union revitalisation.

### **EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT**

Following the New Labour government's announcement of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) to secure much-needed long-term secured levels of investment, in

2003 the London Underground was part-privatised (although widespread public opposition, legal challenges and strike action by the RMT delayed implementation by three years) with the separation of infrastructure from the operation of train services. Responsibility for the day-to-day operation of services on the Underground remained in the hands of the publicly-owned London Underground Limited (LUL), under the overall political control of the Mayor and Transport for London (TfL). But (in similar fashion to the national railway network) the infrastructure of the tube was placed under the control of the private sector, with two private consortia Metronet and Tube undertaking the refurbishment of stations, replacement of tracks, upgrade of signalling and replacement of trains. Overall the Underground employs over 23,000 managerial, administrative and operational staff, of whom almost 14,000 are employed directly by LUL. Some 16,200 tube workers are members of trade unions, with a union density rate of 68.4 per cent, although in LUL density is even higher at over 75 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The RMT is by far the largest union, with almost 12,000 members on the Underground as a whole, composed of 6,781 in LUL, 2,500 in Metronet, 1,000 in Tube Lines, over 700 cleaners, and hundreds of other members employed by various contractors. The other main unions are the Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA).

### **INCIDENCE AND CHARACTER OF STRIKE ACTIVITY 1995-2008**

During the nine years between January 2000-December 2008 the RMT balloted for industrial action on no less than 50 different occasions, with ballots leading to strike action on 18 of these occasions; altogether there were 30 separate strikes involving some 36 strike days involved overall. Strike frequency each year varied from 10 in 2008 to one in 2003, 2004 and 2006, with one strike-free year in 2000. While most strikes were of 24-hours duration, two lasted for 48-hours, three for 36-hours and one for four days. The number of workers involved also varied: 12 days of strike action involved network-wide disputes, five of them embracing over 7,000 workers across all occupational grades, on other occasions 4,000 station staff, 1,500 drivers or 700 cleaners; other disputes were fairly small-scale, with 15 days of strike action involving less than 100 workers. Ballots for industrial action produced a highly impressive majority in favour of strike action of between 76-92 per cent on turnouts of between 29-50 per cent (or an average of 37 percent).

Frequently such ballot results have been used as a form of sabre-rattling designed to bolster the union's bargaining leverage, with no action resulting, although sometimes with significant concessions being extracted. However, on occasions RMT strike *threats* have led to all-out strike *action*, with the impact of the strike (combined with the threat of even further action) often prompting management to compromise. On the one hand, *local* disputes over the perceived infringement of agreed working conditions have escalated into local walk-outs, sometimes with disproportionate high-profile industrial impact. On the other hand, there have been numerous *network-wide* strikes involving the bulk of the RMT's members across LUL or other privatised companies on issues of pay and working conditions. Taking advantage of its members' distinct strategic bargaining position the RMT has also organised a number of 24-hour strike threats over the peak-passenger Christmas and New Year period, as well as threatened strikes on or just before the political symbolic Greater London Assembly and Mayoral election days, purposively designed to have maximum effect in order to put pressure on the employer. Although most strike activity over the last few years has been concentrated within the publicly-owned LUL operations side, by far the most important recent dispute was a 72-hour strike by 2,300 Metronet workers in September 2007 after the failed PPP company had been

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<sup>1</sup> Figures for union membership were obtained from LUL and the RMT.

taken into administration, with the RMT successfully obtaining unequivocal guarantees that there would be no job losses, forced transfers or cuts in pension entitlements as a result of the company's collapse.

There are a number of notable features of the character of strike activity on London Underground. First, a wide variety of different occupational groups have been involved, including train drivers, signal staff, engineering workforce, station staff and cleaners. Second, although there is some tradition of spontaneous semi-unofficial guerrilla action, the vast majority of strike activity has received official union support and been subject to formal balloting procedures. Third, many strikes have tended to be relatively 'political' by virtue of the public ownership and management of LUL and the directly-elected Mayor of London's over-arching powerful influence, as well as the union's vigorous opposition to part-privatisation and persistent campaign for transferring work back to the public sector. Fourth, picketing of Underground stations (and sometimes train depots) has been a common practice, notably in network-wide disputes, with the regular presence of the union's leading officers on picket lines helping to legitimise such activity and embed it as part of the culture of strike activity. Fifth, solidarity action has also been common, both for other groups of workers outside the industry and within the RMT by one grade in support of another.

In order better to contextualise and assess the level of strike action on the Underground over recent years within a historical perspective we can make a number of comparisons. First, the RMT balloted more often and took strike action considerably more often than ASLEF: thus between January 1995-December 2008 while the RMT balloted on 69 occasions, and engaged in 42 strikes (22 of which were network-wide) involving 50 strike days overall, ASLEF balloted on 15 occasions, and engaged in 9 strikes (6 of which were network-wide) involving 12 strike days overall. Second, the number of RMT ballots/strikes on the Underground was also relatively high when compared with the national rail network over the same period 1995-2008, despite the much larger total workforce on the railways and existence of a large number of separate privatised train operating companies, albeit the absolute figures were higher on the railways. Third, in the period since Bob Crow became RMT general secretary in early 2002 there were more ballots, more ballots leading to strike action, more individual numbers of strikes, and more strike days overall than in the preceding seven years 1995-2001; there were also a larger number of local strikes than previously.

We can now examine a multi-dimensional set of interdependent factors that help to explain the high level of strike activity on London Underground – grouped around the themes of political economy, industrial relations, trade unionism, and left-wing politics - and the crucial role of union leadership in linking together these different processes and thereby shaping the direction of collective mobilisation and strike activity.

## **POLITICAL ECONOMY**

The political economy context has been of importance not only in contributing to the broad underlying *industrial* discontent, but also in terms of the *politicisation* of industrial relations and trade unionism on the London Underground. The acute sense of 'betrayal' with New Labour felt by the RMT in the wake of the 1997 general election over the government's refusal to re-nationalise the privatised national railway network was considerably deepened by the part-privatisation of the London Underground via PPP. In order to circumnavigate employment laws that would have made a 'political' strike ballot against privatisation *per se* illegal, the RMT's ballot was framed around the industrial relations 'effects' of PPP, with specific demands concerned with the terms and conditions of the 5,000 workers to be transferred to the

private sector. Nonetheless the campaign was widely understood to be *political* action explicitly focused on a central plank of New Labour policy. There were three 24-hour and two 48-hour network-wide stoppages by 6,500 workers RMT members in 1998, 1999, 2001 and 2002, with two other sets of strikes prevented by High Court injunctions.

At the same time the union launched a broader political campaign of opposition to PPP aimed at galvanising public opinion. Thus in the 2000 Greater London Assembly elections 10 RMT Underground workers, led by Pat Sikorski (newly elected as Assistant General Secretary), ran as candidates as part of the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation, in the process gaining 17,000 votes. The union also provided support to Ken Livingstone's independent campaign for election to the newly created office of London's major, with Livingstone having been excluded from the post of the Labour Party's official candidate on the basis that he explicitly rejected part-privatisation of the tube. Significantly, Livingstone made opposition to the government's PPP plans for the Underground central to his election campaign and the issue played a significant role in his spectacular victory over the Labour Party's official candidate. But after being elected and subsequently losing a legal challenge to prevent PPP, Livingstone announced that he would work with the private infrastructure companies involved. Shortly afterwards Livingstone was readmitted to the Labour Party and proceeded to distance himself from his erstwhile union supporters, whose campaign of strike action now effectively petered out. Livingstone's action further dismayed and alienated the RMT from New Labour.

Meanwhile the impact of PPP was widely perceived to be an organisational and financial fiasco (National Audit Office, 2004; House of Commons, 2005; 2008; London Assembly 2007). This was underlined in July 2007 when, just four years after its introduction, Metronet (awarded two-thirds of the PPP programme) was taken into administration following an estimated overspend of £1.9 billion. 36-hour strike action by the RMT to secure guarantees over jobs, conditions and pensions from the bankrupt company's administrator, was accompanied by demands, subsequently implemented in December 2008, for the contract to be taken back under public ownership by TfL. The politicisation of strike activity was manifest in the union's explicit antagonism towards New Labour neo-liberal policies and in defence of public services. The issue of safety on the Underground has also been a fundamentally important undercurrent to the RMT's strike mobilisation, with a growing number of disputes related to the perceived inherently unsafe nature of PPP. Likewise the refusal of New Labour to amend the Conservative governments' employment laws has also been a recurring issue of contention, with threatened strikes on the Underground repeatedly subject to court injunctions by employers attempting to get the action called off.

However, while all the above political economy features have encouraged Underground workers' sense of injustice and their attribution of blame on the employers and government, they do not in themselves provide a sufficient explanation for the strike mobilisation that has occurred. Other pieces of the jigsaw need to be taken into account.

## **INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS**

A second important contributory factor to the RMT's strike mobilisation approach has been the industrial relations context. On the one hand there has been the nature of organisational restructuring and managerial action and its impact on workers' immediate grievances. The separation of operational and infrastructure functions arising from the process of PPP created a mushrooming of management interfaces

and the blurring of lines of management accountability and responsibility with disruptive consequences for the conduct of industrial relations. Differential collective bargaining arrangements have also led to an erosion of the terms and conditions of employment, pensions and travel benefits of those transferred over to the private sector, which has combined to increase industrial relations tensions. Within the privatised infrastructure companies the persistent threat of outsourcing has been the cause of a number of disputes, notably within Metronet. In addition it would appear that managerial belligerence generally has also helped to encourage the RMT's militant stance and undermined the possibilities for any alternative form of 'social partnership' arrangement as a means of protecting workers' interests.

A new corporate Employee Relations team and Strategic Plan were developed within LUL with the aim of 'improving and stabilising industrial relations'. But in an attempt to move towards a more so-called 'level playing field' LUL management have increasingly attempted to implement radical changes in working practices, cut staffing levels, close ticket offices and reduce the opening times of others, casualise the workforce, and drive up efficiency (for example with more stringent attendance and sickness procedures) with the long-term imperative of cutting labour costs by 30 per cent an overarching theme. In addition there has been the discipline and suspension/dismissal of a succession of union reps who the RMT believe to have been 'victimised' for their union activities. So a high proportion of ballots and strikes appear to have been reactive and *defensive* protests against what has been perceived to be a generalised attack by management that threatens to bypass collective union organisation. In February 2006 the RMT called on LUL managing director Tim O'Toole to help break the cycle of disputes, pointing out: 'It is the frustration of having to deal daily with attacks by managers who seem deliberately to be seeking confrontation that has resulted in our members seeking ballots for industrial action, and backing those ballots with substantial majorities for strike action... Our members report daily abuses, with local managers apparently issuing disciplinary notices at whim, to the extent that existing procedures have effectively been scrapped without negotiation... We have reached a situation where your management is imposing a regime of fear'.<sup>2</sup>

However not all strikes have been of such a defensive nature; some have involved the union attempting to advance the terms and conditions of their members in a more *offensive* fashion. Clearly one highly significant contextual industrial relations factor has been the operational vulnerability of the Underground network to strike action, with the RMT's strategic position, both industrially and within society more generally, obviously providing it with enormous potential bargaining power. Not only is LUL the largest train company in the UK, it also operates the country's most intensive train operation, with passenger journeys over the last 15 years increasing by over 25 percent (such the tube now carries as many passengers every day as on the entire national railway network). The Underground has also experienced massive expansion in terms of capital investment with a £16 billion upgrade of stations, signals, tracks and trains. Moreover, the overriding fear of compulsory redundancy which has loomed over the horizon for many other groups of workers, has been effectively absent within both LUL and the privatised infrastructure companies, under a so-called 'jobs for life' deal whereby reductions in staffing levels are subject to negotiation and involve redeployment to other suitable jobs.

The nature of the industry, and its tightly integrated service network which is not easily substitutable by other means, has provided an important source of workplace bargaining leverage in which strikes have a much greater and immediate impact than

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from RMT to Tom O'Toole, LUL Managing Director, 14 February, 2006.

in many other industrial sectors. Employers are confronted by a number of interrelated pressure points: (a) *industrial pressure*: strikes either force managerial concessions or risk high stakes in terms of operational paralysis; (b) *customer pressure*: the effect of strikes on passengers are immediate and extremely inconvenient and (c) *media pressure*: stopping London's tube is dramatic and unwelcome news across the country, even the world; (d) *business and financial pressure*: strikes provoke the wrath of large companies and the City of London ; and (e) *political pressure*: strike disruption is an electoral liability that elicits both political party and government intervention.

In other words the industrial relations context (along with that of the political economy) has been an important factor creating the underlying material conditions that have given rise to strike activity on the London Underground. It has contributed to the process whereby workers have acquired a sense of grievance/injustice and come to define their interests collectively in opposition to employers/government. Such a context has also provided the opportunity and ability for workers to engage in effective strike mobilisation. Nonetheless the role of *agency* – namely the leadership role of union reps and activists - has *also* been a crucial resource necessary for such collective action.

## **TRADE UNIONISM**

Although RMT organisation on the Underground survived the 1980s era of Thatcherism without suffering any crushing strike defeats, the 1992 imposition of a *Company Plan*, involving completely new contracts of employment, working arrangements and collective bargaining structures across the whole network, represented a serious defeat for union organisation with the loss of some 5,000 jobs between 1993-4 (Darlington, 2001: 10). Then in 1994 management, determined to punish the RMT for a network-wide 24-hour strike over pay, withdrew the union's pay-roll check-off facility, whilst leaving it intact for ASLEF. This had the immediate effect of reducing RMT membership on the Underground by a few hundred. The introduction of PPP which followed in 2003 further challenged the strength of union organisation, notably with the fragmentation of organisational structures and bargaining arrangements and a marked decline in the level of union membership on the privatised maintenance side. Yet paradoxically in the years that followed there has been a revitalisation of RMT organisation on the Underground, with the radically fragmented and devolved bargaining arrangements encouraging the re-fertilisation of a new layer of union reps and activists with a closer and more accountable relationship to their members.

Of crucial significance in encouraging the revitalisation of union organisation and the accompanying high level of strike activity has been the development of the RMT's London Transport Regional Council. During the 1990s the Regional Council became a powerful organising body, a monthly 'shop stewards' assembly', which provided coordinated network-wide leadership to strike activity, notably in the struggle against PPP but also over annual pay and conditions agreements. The Regional Council became highly self-sufficient with a level of centralised organisation unsurpassed by any other region, including: a regular newsletter sent out to some 450 activists (local/functional reps, health and safety reps, branch officers and other activists across the network; its own union organising and membership recruitment initiatives; and the power to initiate strike activity across the Underground.

Another important factor transforming the RMT has been the role of national leadership, with the election of Bob Crow as general secretary in early 2002 being both cause and effect. Crow has noticeably stamped his oppositionist leadership

style towards the employers and New Labour on the union and helped to shape strategic and tactical issues, with a consistent stress on so-called 'old-fashioned' virtues of collectivism, solidarity, resistance and activism. Such a strike mobilisation approach has itself been an important contributory factor to the re-energisation of union organisation, and in turn to the level of strike activity itself. Thus the process of winning support for ballots and strike activity has encouraged an active and direct engagement by officers/ reps with the members. The threat/use of strike action has often successfully leveraged significant collective bargaining concessions from employers (on pay, conditions, pensions, outsourcing, discipline, etc) thereby providing visible, material, measurable and high-profile evidence of the union's power and effectiveness. In turn this has contributed to boosting union confidence and membership recruitment.

There has now developed a large milieu of assertive and combative lay reps and activists who have played a crucial role in advocating and winning support for the mobilisation of union members in collective action against employers. Such activists have clearly been important in 'framing' issues, pitting them in antagonism to management, 'mobilising bias' (Batstone *et al*, 1977) to win strike ballot votes, and displaying leadership and organising skills. Meanwhile there has been a sustained union organising campaign over the last few years aimed at the recruitment of new members, with an emphasis on recruiting new members beyond the traditional core groups (of train drivers, guards, signallers, track workers, station staff) to previously neglected groups of workers, notably poorly-paid, mainly immigrant, cleaning staff employed by private companies. In 2008 there was a successful campaign of network-wide strike action by RMT cleaners to win the 'London living wage' of £7.20p an hour, with the recruitment of dozens of new union members. The total growth in union membership on the Underground over the last few years has been very impressive, increasing from 9,200 when Crow was elected in early 2002 to 11,760 by the end of 2008, an increase over a seven-year period of 2,560 members or 27.8 per cent.<sup>3</sup> It seems likely the increase in union membership has both been a product of union militancy and a contributory factor to such militancy.

## **LEFT-WING POLITICS**

One of the legacies of a highly politicised industrial environment, and of previous internal battles over strategic direction within the union, is that there is a significant layer of left-wing political activists inside the RMT who have also played a contributory role to the level of strike activity. Such a left-wing tradition developed in part from the ideological and practical activities of unofficial caucus groups established inside the union during the 1980s and early 1990s. One important fruit of the left's rising influence and the combative mood of the union's members in the wake of PPP was the huge majority in support of Crow's election on a platform of creating a 'fighting trade union'. Similarly the Regional Council now has a combination of what one union activist has termed a 'political left' (members of far-left parties) and a 'syndicalist left' (non-party industrial militants), both of whom adopt a consistently adversarial approach to management with a more or less politically informed agenda. More broadly a wide network of prominent left-wing figures (from Crow and other national officers to lay union reps and activists) have been increasingly influential in shaping the union's rejection of social partnership in favour of the use of strike ballots and mobilisation of members as the means to win concessions. This has made it easier for an internal union culture of militant oppositionalism directed towards employers and New Labour, combined with robust

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<sup>3</sup> Figures supplied from RMT see also London Assembly (2006).

collectivism and assertive style of leadership, to pervade the union with ramifications for the level of strike activity on the Underground.

Meanwhile the influence of the left within the RMT on the Underground has also been evident in the role it played in encouraging the union, after a number of years of internal debate, to break its historic link with the Labour Party on the basis that New Labour had destroyed the party's core principles. In addition the left's influence has been discernible in the extent to which a form of *political trade unionism* has become embedded, involving not only an explicit opposition to the neo-liberal agenda of free market policies and the Iraq war, but also a critical questioning of the priorities of capitalist society in general.

## **SOME CONCLUSIONS**

Boris Johnson's mayoral electoral victory in May 2008 has opened up the possibility of a head-on confrontation between LUL and the RMT in the lead up to the 2012 London-based Olympic Games, commonly viewed as likely to be the 'Mother of All Battles'. At the time of writing (April 2009) some 9,000 RMT tube workers (across LUL, ex-Metronet and TfL) were being balloted for strike action over managerial attempts to introduce a 5-year pay deal, against the backdrop of an estimated £5 billion funding shortfall posing the threat of huge job losses.

While the case study evidence suggests that Johnson's 'agitator theory' of strikes exaggerates and presents a distorted one-dimensional picture, there *is* an important element of truth in the thesis (Darlington, 2006): thus the importance of union activists at every level of the RMT, and in particular left-wing activists, in identifying, formulating and articulating grievances, encouraging a sense of collective identity in antagonism to the employers, and providing leadership to the mobilisation of workplace strike activity. In this respect the efficacy of mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998) as a tool of analysis of such processes deserves due recognition. Even if trade union activists and/or left-wing militants have not in any sense *caused* the underlying material conditions that have led to strike activity, their activity and leadership *has* clearly been an important variable (amongst a variety of other factors) to the dynamics of strike mobilisation. But the study underlines the importance of an analysis that gives equal consideration to both *objective* and *subjective* elements (or a structure-agency dynamic) and the interrelationship between them; to an analysis that is anchored on a range of specific contextual and contingent factors that have served as both provocations and resources for strike mobilisation, as well as the role of trade union leadership and left-wing politics whose influence has also helped collectivise workers' discrete experiences and aspirations in forms which have encouraged combativity (Hyman, 1989: 188; Franzosi, 1995).

In addition the study highlights the relatively very favourable industrial context within which RMT strike activity has occurred in recent years (despite the overall challenges posed by PPP) which have not necessarily been present elsewhere in Britain. The success of the RMT's approach cannot necessarily be assumed to be automatically replicable by other unions that operate in less favourable contexts. Moreover it seems likely the sheer scale of the current economic recession will pose new and rather more formidable challenges for union organisation and the willingness of workers to engage in strike activity.

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