



## Has negotiation gone down the Tube?

18 August 2008

**Opinion piece by Jo Valentine, which appeared in the Evening Standard, 18 August 2008**

For anyone shoe-horned daily into a rush-hour Tube on the Jubilee, Northern or Piccadilly Lines, you know all too intimately how many people cram into trains on those lines every day. Next week, all of these people will be forced instead to cram themselves into already packed buses and overground trains when the RMT union calls the first of two 72-hour strikes for its members employed by Tube Lines, the company which maintains the 3 lines.

The Underground is the backbone of London's transport network. Commuters rely on it to get to work - twenty-five per cent of central London's work-force commute by Tube. Tourists rely on it to visit London's myriad of attractions. Even some MPs rely on it. It is crucial that it runs smoothly. For commuters to have to suffer the irritation caused by strikes is one thing. The cost of strike action on the London economy is quite another: a major strike costs London in the region of £50 million. Staggering. But is it justified?

RMT balloted its Tube Lines members on strike action having rejected a pay offer of 4.85 per cent. Fewer than 300 of their members voted in favour of the strikes. So, as it stands, less than 300 of their members voted to hold 3.4 million Tube users to ransom. Which begs the question: how can this be allowed to go on? Londoners are, by and large, a long-suffering and tolerant bunch. But at what price? For how much longer must they cower under the shadow of Bob Crow, RMT general secretary, and his small band of strike-happy subordinates?

The RMT has proved too willing to strike. It has called for more strikes in the last two years than any other union this side of the channel - on average, one strike threat every month for the last few years. Public sentiment is critical to winning a cause. The RMT is doing little to further the cause of its members by alienating them from the rest of general public.

Next week's strikes, if they go ahead, need to be understood in the wider political context. Certain unions have always been opposed to the Tube Public Private Partnership (PPP) contracts, of which Tube Lines is one, the now defunct Metronet, the second. This is despite the massive extra investment it is delivering for improvements to the creaking Underground network. After years of underinvestment, from successive governments of both political persuasions, there is now funding for improvements which we can feel, and will continue to feel, in the coming years. The addition of the seventh carriage on Jubilee line trains is a case in point. We at London First, on behalf of London's business community, have long been championing the need for investment into the Tube. PPP contracts may not be the perfect solution, but they are a means of locking in long term investment. This is by no means the end of the story. We must continue to press Government for further funding for vital improvements in the next phase of the Tube contracts - in whatever form the contracts take in the future. But what Bob Crow's small team of union members is playing here is a game of political football. One might ask if this is the shape of the things to come - the age-old anachronism of 'left-wing' unions against 'fat cat' employers, this time played out against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting political landscape. And, lest we forget, a Tory mayor. But this is not a Tory/Labour issue. Both Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson confirmed their commitment to the smooth-running of the Tube and refusal to be held hostage by strike threats during the Mayoral campaign. This is an issue of holding London's daily Tube users over a barrel, regardless.

Where has the long-trusted concept of negotiation gone? Down the tube, it appears. No attempt was made last week, on the part of the RMT, to draft in the help of ACAS, the independent conciliation service which works to resolve issues, and broker a deal. The new Mayor has expressed his desire for a no-strike deal ahead of 2012. In return for unions signing up to a pledge not to stage strikes, the Mayor and London Underground would pledge to involve an independent mediator over pay disputes. Surely this is a deal both sides should welcome? With the current RMT leadership, that deal looks very challenging to deliver.



One thing is certain, however – in no way should politics get in the way of public service. That is the point at which Londoners may well decide they've had enough. But, despite the wrangles going on at the moment, I - and millions of others, I imagine - am extremely grateful for those workers who descend, night after night, to repair our Tube system while we are tucked up in bed.

There may be genuine issues to be resolved in this dispute. On behalf of London's millions of commuters, I urge for this to be done through reasoned negotiation, not bully boy tactics. Both sides, employers and the unions, have to work together to reach a deal. We would like to see the RMT – and other unions – sign up to the Mayor's no-strike deal. But to the RMT, I say - drop that political football. The Tube should be one of London's trophies in the cabinet. Don't reduce it to a penalty shoot-out – where London's commuters are the real losers.

**For more information, please contact Lauren Preteceille, [lpreteceille@londonfirst.co.uk](mailto:lpreteceille@londonfirst.co.uk)**