

RAIL

Metronet

BY A RMT MEMBER

A STRIKE by Tube workers, working for bankrupt infrastructure company Metronet was suspended early in September when talks between the company, the administrator and the union resumed. The union say they are happy with the outcome of talks on pensions and other issues raised by the bankruptcy, but which way will the union go on privatisation? Faced with two resolutions from the RMT London Transport Regional Council — one which demanded a ballot to bring Metronet immediately under TfL control and the other a demand for a campaign to lobby politicians and pursue guarantees over pensions etc — the RMT leadership opted for option two. Of course option two stays within the law thus protecting the union [the properties, funds, full-time positions and salaries, not the living organism composed of our brothers and sisters you understand]. Secondly the self-appointed vanguards who compose much of the leadership are inherently distrustful of the working class. You see these gents [the exec and above are all men] are under the misapprehension that they are the only ones capable of considering political decisions such as re-nationalisation — ordinary workers they believe are only interested in bread-and-butter issues such as pensions, transfers and possible job cuts.

But Metronet workers want to work for a public company. They want the material benefits of doing so ie. a TfL pension and free travel for workers and their families. Even members of the left who should know better argued for option two, claiming that once workers went on strike they would then automatically begin to fight for renationalisation. Some of us pointed out that this had not happened during previous privatisations when we fought under the cover of health and safety in the campaign against Tube privatisation and lost.

Far from becoming more militant workers were worn down by one- and two-day actions which did not raise the demand that we should strike to stay in the public sector. Sometimes it is necessary to go through the process with workers to prove in practice that our ideas are correct but if we continually go at the pace of the slowest runner we will all finish last [particularly galling is that some of the slower ones actually belong to avowedly Marxist groups].

To bring Metronet back in house and to protect the East London line from privateering sharks we must act as an industrial union and break the anti-union laws. Our leaders have been campaigning against these laws for over 15 years and are only too well aware that they will be repealed only when they are actually broken on the ground.

The three items the RMT chose to fight over — pensions, job cuts and transfers — have seemingly been resolved as we guessed they would, and the privatisation juggernaut still rumbles on though perhaps with new drivers, as we said it would. The question is now that we’ve fought one we knew we would win, do we have the courage to fight one we may lose i.e fight for complete renationalisation?

To take on this fight we need to break the anti-union laws. Our movement has a history of opposing unjust laws, the Tolpuddle Martyrs being the most obvious example [without whom unions may not now exist]. As our elected leader is fond of saying, there is no guarantee of victory if you fight, but there’s the certainty of defeat if you don’t. Let’s have the courage to fight and win.

Rally for trade union freedom
18 OCTOBER
COMMITTEE ROOM 14, HOUSE OF COMMONS, 5.30PM
CALLED IN SUPPORT OF THE TRADE UNION FREEDOM BILL

TUC: good words. Now for action!

BY JANINE BOOTH, RMT DELEGATE TO TUC CONFERENCE

THE big debate at TUC conference was on public services and public sector pay. The TUC had attempted to sedate us all in advance, with guest speeches from not just the CBI but also government ministers Jacqui Smith and Peter Hain — the latter telling us that the government, trade unions and employers had reached an “historic consensus” on pension reform, prompting me to heckle “I didn’t!”. The two main composites were 12, on public services, and 13, on public sector pay. There was never any doubt that they would pass unanimously, but the content and fire of the speeches would also give a clue as to union leaders’ commitment to see the fight through. Proposing Composite 13, PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka challenged Gordon Brown’s argument that you need to restrain workers’ pay to defeat inflation. He quoted Brown in saying that “The price of a job should never be substandard pay”, pointing out poverty pay levels among civil servants. Mark announced to great cheers that workers in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had voted by 76% to reject their pay offer. He

might have mentioned (but didn’t) the ironic fact that those workers’ boss, John Hutton, would be given a big chunk of Congress time on the next day to tell us what a good bloke he is. Just when I began to fear that Mark’s speech would be all rumbustious fat-cat- and government-bashing, but nothing on how we would fight back, he set out the case for co-ordinated industrial action, civil servants alongside health workers, posties, teachers and others. 200 people had attended PCS’s fringe meeting on the subject, and he called for the TUC to call a meeting to co-ordinate action immediately Congress finished. Good stuff. Seconding, Christine Blower offered the solidarity of the NUT to other public sector unions. She stated that if in November, the teachers’ pay review body failed to deliver decent pay rises, then the NUT would call industrial action co-ordinated with other unions. Christine did not explain why this had to wait until November — after all, how likely is it that the pay review body will go against government policy and give teachers the rise they deserve?! A speaker from the Prison Officers’ Association pointed out that Prison Service managers will be getting their pay rise in full, whilst the lowest-paid workers in the service -

ancillary staff — will have their rise staged, pegged to 10p per hour instead of 15p. “How will that 5p difference fuel inflation, while tax breaks to private equity won’t?!”, he asked. The POA also joined the call for co-ordinated industrial action. A UCU speaker expressed gratitude to the PCS and POA for demonstrating that members can be won to a programme of strike action. However, I see more grounds for concern as to whether union leaders can be won to strike action, especially strike action of more than token days. Rank-and-file members will always be willing to fight, especially when given leadership they can be confident in. And to me, that is now the issue. The Congress debate was welcome — a clear declaration of intent for co-ordinated industrial action to break Brown’s public sector pay cuts. But the demand for co-ordinated action must not become an excuse for union leaders not to fight unless every other union is doing so too. And the action they co-ordinate must be more than isolated days out to show token protests rather than a strategy to win. Now we have the Congress policy, we need rank-and-file pressure to make the union leaders deliver.

• Janine Booth writes in a personal capacity.

FREEMANTLE

Not silenced!

THE Fremantle Trust, which holds the contracts for care homes in Barnet, North London, made enormous cuts to workers’ wages and benefits of their workers in April. The dispute led to strike action in August, the sacking of Unison steward Andrew Rogers and a campaign to reinstate him. Proposed cuts to the already low wages are up to 30%; threats are being made to axe sick pay, increase hours, reduce holidays, reduce payment for unsocial hours and cut pensions by up to a third. So, Fremantle, not a big fan of workers then? Well, no indeed, but it would seem that they are not big fans of freedom of speech either. The labour movement website labourstart.org took up the campaign and within a few days over 8000 messages of solidarity were sent to the Fremantle HQ. Fremantle did what all good “not for profit” employers do and threatened to sue Labourstart; they saw this as a challenge and stepped up the campaign. It was then that Fremantle, clutching at straws, delivered the same threat to Labourstart’s Internet Service Provider if the campaign was not removed from the site.

The ISP issued an ultimatum — remove all mention of Fremantle by noon on Friday 7 September or the site would be closed. After intense talks with the ISP all traces of the campaign were reluctantly removed from the site. Labourstart then found some new web space and published a new site dedicated to the campaign, in nine languages, hosted outside the UK and mockingly named “We Will Not Be Silenced”. Something tells me that Fremantle might regret making such a fuss when they next check their inbox! The new site can be found at www.wewillnotbesilenced.org with a link to the Barnet Unison blog. We urge you to join the thousands of others in sending messages of solidarity to the Freemantle workers.

UNISON

Karen Reissman

OVER 600 mental health workers in Manchester took three days of strike action in August to demand the rein-

statement of their Unison rep, Karen Reissman, who was suspended from her job in June. Managers of the Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust, which is in serious financial difficulties and last year tried to make large cuts in the service, claimed that she had “brought the Trust into disrepute” by speaking out against the cuts and organising strike action against them. The suspension came on the day she received a letter confirming her promotion to senior psychiatric nurse and forbade her to have any contact with her clients. Despite offers from the union to organise emergency cover during the strike, the management bussed patients, many with serious psychiatric problems, out of Manchester to private hospitals, some as far away as Darlington. They are still there despite an estimated cost of up to £1,000 per person per night. This strike-breaking move was planned well in advance of the strikes. A demonstration of several hundred supporters took place last Sunday and further action is planned. This dispute is a major test of whether trade unionists can speak out against cuts and “reform” of the NHS without victimisation. Donations and messages of support to the Manchester Community and Mental Health Unison branch, 70 Manchester Road, Manchester, M21 9UN.

DISABLED WORKERS

Remploy

BY HEATHER SHAW

REMPLOY was set up over 60 years ago to provide work for people injured in the Second World War and now aims to provide “satisfying and rewarding jobs” for people with varying disabilities. It operates 10 businesses over 83 locations in the UK and employs 6,500 people. Most of these people are employed in Remploy’s own factories making school furniture and specialist protective clothing for the police and military. Remploy’s new mission is to close these specialist factories and become little more than an employment agency that pays so-called mainstream employers to take on disabled workers, i.e. matching soulless jobs with people misfortunate enough to have fallen victim to a vicious job market. The proposed closure of 42 of the 83 sites and the redundancy of up to 2500 workers is the result. Charities such as MIND and Mencap are supporting the closures saying that workers should be “given” jobs in mainstream industries. But Phil Davis, GMB National Secretary

insists that these jobs are hard to find and are often of low quality. The government wants Remploy to take on more people but without any more money, demonstrating a severe lack of dedication to people with disabilities and feigned attempts to integrate them in to mainstream society. This is yet another case of the holier-than-thou bosses and charities assuming that they know what is best for a group of individuals. I say stop patronising workers and stand in solidarity with people with disabilities against these plans. Join the Remploy Crusade – passing through a town near you on their way through the UK on an awareness and fundraising tour. A full timetable can be found on the GMB website.

SCHOOLS

Wembley occupation

FOR six months, teachers in Brent and others opposed to the building of a second city academy in the borough, have been occupying the proposed site. The land down the road from the stadium is owned by TfL, and currently houses playing fields, a private nursery and a motorcycle training school. The campaign, which has staved off the academy for three years, already scaring off at least one sponsor, has seen both the former Labour and the recent Lib Dem-Tory coalition councils try to push ahead — regardless of the formidable opposition from teachers and residents. On Sunday 9 September from three tree houses overlooking the road, protesters — including one hanging from a harness between the tall trees — were hailed by passing cars and buses hooting in support, and were encouraged by residents stopping to sign the petition. It was a last stand for the moment since the current leaseholders were threatened by the council that they would have leases terminated early if they did not get rid of the camp. The campaign continues, and re-occupying is not ruled out. While the campaign has been tenacious and persistent, a questionable strategy has been adopted: a NIMBY approach, focusing on potential traffic and noise, has allowed the Tories to opportunistically champion the campaign in a bid for votes. This may well pay-off in the short term, but the campaign also calls for a school to be built in the south of Brent rather than the north; if and when that happens, anti-academy campaigners may find themselves on the back-foot.