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Union militancy and left-wing leadership on London underground

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-2338.00180>

Title	Union militancy and left-wing leadership on London underground
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Type	Article
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/10106/
Published Date	2001

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Leadership is central to the fundamental problem of how individual workers are transformed into collective actors, willing and able to create and sustain collective organisation, and to engage in collective action against their employers. Evidence of the important role of 'leader' shop stewards was provided in the pioneering studies of Batstone *et al* (1977; 1978). Other workplace studies over the last 25 years have also shown the importance of formal and informal shop-floor leaders and activists in influencing their members and shaping workers' interests (Beynon, 1973; Nichols and Armstrong, 1976; Pollert, 1981; Terry and Edwards, 1988; Fosh and Cohen, 1990; Scott, 1994). In an important attempt to draw some theoretical generalisations from these highly insightful descriptions of social processes at the workplace, Kelly (1997; 1998) has drawn on the work of several writers within the social movements and collective action tradition, in particular Tilly (1978), Fantasia (1988), McAdam (1988) and Gamson (1992, 1995). He underlines the crucial role that shop-floor leaders and activists play in the process of collectivisation. First, they help to construct a sense of grievance amongst workers, attributing blame onto employers and/or the state rather than to uncontrollable economic forces or events. Second, they promote a sense of group or social identity, which encourages workers to become aware of their common interests in opposition to those of the employers. Third, they urge workers to engage in collective action, a process of persuasion that is assumed to be essential because of the costs of such action and the inexperience of many people with its different forms and consequences. Fourth, they legitimate such collective action in the face of employers' counter-mobilising arguments that it is illegitimate.

Nonetheless, as Kelly has acknowledged, although the role of leadership has attracted some attention within the field of industrial relations, there has been a tendency (with some exceptions, see Darlington, 1993; 1994; 1998; Gall, 1999; Fishman, 1995; Jeffreys, 1988; Kelly, 1998, Lyddon and Darlington, 2000; McIlroy and Campbell, 1999; McIlroy *et al*, 1999; Terry and Edwards, 1988) to underestimate the significance of *left-wing* leadership in trade union activity and mobilisation. The term 'left-wing' can be defined broadly to include those union activists who have a fixed affiliation to a far-left political party or are on the left of the Labour Party, as well as those independent non-party industrial militants who share class/socialist politics. Their specific role in the process of worker collectivisation and activity is usually completely ignored. Equally, there is little literature on the influence of organised left-wing factions (based on the Communist Party or other more extreme left and Trotskyist organisations) within the unions' policy making bodies (again with some exceptions, see Seifert, 1984; Undy *at al* 1981; 1996; Carter, 1997)). Yet trade unions are often the site of intense ideological struggles between different groups of activists about the definition of members' interests and the most appropriate means for their pursuit. Moreover, such ideological struggles are also to be found within the collective bargaining arena, related to differing strategies of how to react to and confront employers. For example, is an employer's demand for more flexible working practices something that should be accepted, negotiated over, or rejected out of hand with the threat of action if necessary?

Recent workplace studies by Darlington (1993; 1994; 1998) have revealed the significance of shop stewards' political affiliations, and the influence and leadership that groups of left-wing activists can exert on workplace activity. These studies show

that left-wing union representatives with an overtly ideological and solidaristic (rather than instrumental and individualistic) commitment to trade unionism, can play a crucial role in translating shop-floor discontent into a sense of injustice, which then enables them to mobilise workers for collective action against management. Whilst the political sympathies of left-wing union activists can vary, the common thread binding them together is a commitment to building the strength of workplace union organisation through an adversarial approach to managerial prerogative. Invariably this involves them in challenging alternative, usually more pragmatic and moderate, strategies advocated by other activists, as well as encouraging their members who might not share all their political/adversarial ideas to be prepared to engage in militant collective activity. In other words, it would appear that the *politics* of union leadership is an important ingredient, amongst other factors, to an understanding of the dynamics of workplace industrial relations and trade unionism.

However, the model of militant trade unionism, advocated by left-wing political activists, has been castigated as being destructive and self-defeating (Bassett, 1986, Taylor, 1994). Many commentators (Ackers and Payne, 1998; TUC, 1998; Unions 21, 1999) have recently argued that union survival and recovery in the 21st century will depend on the willingness of unions and their members to behave 'moderately' and to engage in a 'social partnership' between workers and employers. This emphasis on the mutual identity between trade unions and managers, aimed at improving corporate competitiveness in the private sector or service quality in the public sector, has been spelt out by the TUC in its 'New Unionism' project: 'At the workplace social partnership means employers and trade unions working together to achieve common goals such as fairness and competition; it is a recognition that,

although they have different constituencies, and at times different interests, they can serve these best by making common cause wherever possible' (TUC, 1997). It means abandoning an adversarial approach and accepting the need for co-operation in changing workplace culture in a more consensual direction. As Prime Minister Tony Blair argued recently: 'Employment security and worthwhile jobs can only be delivered if trade union members are employed by successful organisations. The rhetoric of struggle, strikes and strife therefore has little resonance in today's world of work' (*Guardian*, 24 May 1999). Recent 'social partnership' agreements between Tesco and USDAW, Blue Circle and the AEEU and Panasonic and the GMB, have underlined the trend that is taking place (TUC, 1998; *Labour Research*, June 1998) However, not all unions have embraced 'social partnership' agreements, for example the NUM, FBU, and RMT are unions that retain adversarial traditions.

In a further contribution to the debate Kelly (1996) has attempted to categorise unions as being either 'militant' or 'moderate', on the basis of five dimensions: goals, methods, membership resources, institutional resources, and ideology. In brief, 'militant' unions are defined as being willing to take industrial action, having an ideology of conflicting interests and relying strongly on the mobilisation of members. 'Moderate' unions are defined as taking industrial action infrequently or not at all, having an ideology of partnership and strongly relying on employers.

Of course, it is acknowledged that militancy and moderation are best understood as two ends of a continuum, and that unions are not completely free agents in so far as their stance and behaviour result from an interaction with the

economic, political and industrial relations environment in which they find themselves. For example, the level of unemployment, employers' (and state) behaviour, the nature of product and labour markets, and other factors will all create a more or less favourable environment for militancy or moderation. Unions may be militant on some dimensions, for example with very ambitious bargaining demands (for example, on pay), but moderate on others (for example, on restructuring). They may not always feel it necessary to organise industrial action, for example because their strategic bargaining position makes this unnecessary, and they may sometimes advocate a strategic retreat, for example because a large section of their members are unwilling to fight. Similarly, the overall balance of relations between capital and labour in Britain can have a profound impact on the general conditions in which militancy in any industry/workplace might thrive at the expense of moderation and vice versa. As McIlroy (2000) has argued, the decline in working class militancy generally in Britain, particularly since the defeat of the 1984-5 miners' strike, still constrains the response of trade unionists at all levels, as well as what left-wing activists can strategically seek to achieve. Nonetheless, if *objective* environmental factors provide, or undermine, potential power resources within the bargaining arena, the *subjective* factor is also important in terms of the forms to which, and whether, they are mobilised. Thus, whilst the collectivisation and mobilisation of the workforce into militant action *can* emerge spontaneously, it is *also* often constructed by leaders or activists who can provide important strategic and tactical guidance and direction.

In other words, despite some qualifications, the broad distinction between 'militancy' and 'moderation' is a useful analytical tool for contrasting the different approaches and behaviour adopted by unions. And such labels can be applied not

only to unions as a whole, but also to intra-union bodies such as regional or shop stewards' committees, although a further distinction can also be made here between *union* militancy - with reference to the organisation as an entity, and *labour* militancy - with reference to workplace-based behaviour and activity (Gall, 2000). Significantly, the militancy/moderation axis can also be useful as a means by which to more fully appreciate the importance of *left-wing leadership* within trade unions, particularly in the light of the fact that those national unions that retain an adversarial tradition cited above, all have leaders at different levels of the organisation from a left-wing political persuasion.

Kelly (1996; 1998) summarises some of the arguments used by those who advocate moderation. Within a highly intensified competitive world, unions have to moderate their demands and offer concessions to the employers or face the risk of job loss or de-recognition. Strikes are said to be ineffective insofar as they either fail to achieve their objectives or achieve them at such heavy financial cost to the strikers that they constitute Pyrrhic victories. It is also claimed there are various payoffs to moderate unionism, including job security, training, health and safety. By contrast, the arguments in favour of militancy include the view that the growing hostility of employers to any form of unionism and collective bargaining makes social partnership impossible to achieve; that compared with militancy gains from moderation are meagre, whether measured by membership increases or union strength and influence; and that moderation can seriously weaken trade unions and leave them vulnerable to employers' attacks because they erode the willingness and capacity of members to resist and to challenge employer demands.

With such considerations in mind we can now turn to some case study research into trade union organisation within the London Underground, with the aim of further exploring the relationship between left-wing political leadership and trade union/labour militancy in one particular industry, namely the London Underground

CASE STUDY: THE LONDON UNDERGROUND

Despite the record low levels of industrial action generally in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, trade unionism in the public sector has been much more resilient than in private industry, measured both by stability and density of membership, as well as by figures on industrial action (Millward *et al*, 1992; Cully *et al*, 1999). And within the public sector three of the main locations of union militancy – the Royal Mail, Fire Service and London Underground – appear to have been characterised by important common features, such as the influence of a monopoly service, buoyant markets and increased traffic volumes, the lack of compulsory redundancies, the homogeneity of large manual workforces with high union memberships, the immediate impact that strike action could potentially have, and the lack of any serious defeats for workers taking strike action, all of which have contributed to creating a favourable situation for workers to engage in militant activity to resist managerial restructuring compared with the more quiescent labour response generally (Beale, 1999; Fitzgerald and Stirling, 1999; Gall, 1995; Report, 2000). In addition, within important local areas of the Royal Mail and Fire Service, the influence of left-wing activists to such militancy has also been evident (Darlington, 1993; 1998).

However, whilst some of these public-sector industries have been the subject of attention by industrial relations researchers the London Underground remains virtually unexplored territory (Urquhart, 1992). This is remarkable considering the centrality of the service to Britain's capital city, the evident importance of the Underground lines and depots as major workplaces in their own right, and the fact that the industry experienced a relatively very high level of strike action throughout the 1990s [see table]. The series of 24 and 48-hour strikes by the National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) during 1998 and early 1999 in opposition to Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's plans to part-privatise the London Underground through a Public Private Partnership (DofE, 1998), highlighted in graphic relief the adversarial nature of industrial relations on the Underground in recent years.

Of particular importance in understanding the nature of industrial relations on the London Underground is the influential role of its two main trade unions, notably the RMT and the Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF). Significantly, during the mid-late 1990s, there was the rise of a number of left-wing political activists to influential union positions within the RMT on the London Underground, many of these associated with the far left Socialist Labour Party (SLP) headed by the miners' union leader Arthur Scargill. They included Pat Sikorski, secretary of the RMT London Underground District Council, and Bob Crow, RMT Assistant General Secretary with responsibility for the Underground. It seems likely, although hitherto has never been examined, that the influence of this left-wing political leadership has been reflected in the belligerent attitude adopted by the union and its members towards Underground management, and in the almost annual bouts

of industrial action. At the very least, it appears to have contributed to the militant resolutions in protest at Tony Blair's alleged pro-business policies endorsed by delegates at recent annual union conferences, with a motion at the 1999 conference to end financial support for the Labour Party unless its policies on privatisation were reversed only narrowly defeated. And in 2000, London RMT members, following a recommendation by their left-wing leaders, voted by 91 per cent in favour of Ken Livingstone's independent bid for London Mayor against New Labour's candidate on a platform of opposition to privatisation of the Tube. Certainly, in many respects, the RMT on London Underground, with its left-wing leadership, seems to typify the image of so-called old-fashioned militant trade unionism which many commentators assumed had long ago been abandoned. 'It is back to the bad old days, the bad old ways of the 1970s' (*Financial Times*, 16 June 1998) as John Redwood, Shadow Trade and Industry spokesperson at the time, commented in 1998.

By contrast, although there is an informal left-wing grouping based on the national railway network within ASLEF there has been a fairly conservative and right-wing Labour tradition on the London Underground, albeit with an occasional militant industrial edge. Significantly, train drivers' anger at the union leadership's agreement to productivity changes with the privatised railway companies and its initial equivocal stance towards semi-privatisation of London Underground, appears to have been a major factor in the recent election of SLP member Dave 'Micky' Rix to the key post of General Secretary. But Rix's position is an isolated one and the left does not have any real base on the Underground, although there was, like the RMT, strong support for Ken Livingstone. Certainly, whilst prepared to threaten and occasionally engage in strike action, the ASLEF leadership has traditionally taken a much less

confrontational stance than the RMT, and has refused on a number of occasions in recent years to support industrial action mounted by the RMT in defence of wages and conditions. It also voiced strong criticism of the RMT's campaign of industrial action against the Public Private Partnership (*Locomotive Journal*, January 1998). The type of 'social partnership' advocated by the TUC has not been actively taken up by ASLEF. But compared with the RMT, the union has adopted a rather more collaborative posture on the London Underground. Such differences have been compounded by the history of difficult and sometimes very acrimonious relationships between the two unions (Bagwell, 1982; Pendelton, 1993).

This article presents the findings of case study research into trade union organisation and activity on the London Underground with the aim of exploring two main research questions. First, to what extent have left-wing activists inside the RMT contributed to shaping the militant union response to management, encouraging the collectivisation and mobilisation of workers to produce the relatively high levels of strike action that have been recorded throughout the 1990s? Second, has this militant union strategy been effective in terms of obtaining material rewards for union members, or has it merely been self-defeating compared with the more moderate approach adopted by ASLEF?

Most of the research evidence was obtained through extensive semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with fifteen strategically placed informants of both militant and more moderate persuasions. These included RMT national officials, Regional Council reps, union branch officers and union members, as well as ASLEF branch officers and London Underground human resource managers. This was

supplemented by participant observation of RMT branch meetings and detailed analysis of RMT and ASLEF documentary material. It involved examining not merely a snap-shot of contemporary features but an *historical* overview of the changing pattern of industrial relations and trade unionism on the London Underground from the late 1980s through to the late 1990s.

The article is divided into four sections. First, the structure of the London Underground, and the nature of its workforce and trade union organisation, is outlined. The following three sections provide a chronological narrative and analysis of the dynamic nature of industrial relations and trade unionism on the Underground over the last ten years. Finally, some conclusions are made and wider assessment is drawn from the case study evidence.

NATURE OF INDUSTRY AND WORKFORCE

The London Underground is the largest underground transport network in the world. Its history dates back to 1863 when the world's first Underground railway opened in London. The vast majority of the central London Underground lines were built before the First World War, with the suburban extensions largely being constructed in the period before and shortly after the Second World War (Howson, 1971). Since then, the most significant developments have been the building of the Victoria Line, which was opened in stages between 1968 and 1971, the extension of the Piccadilly Line, which reached Heathrow Airport in 1977 and Terminal Four in 1986, and the building

of the Jubilee Line Extension, which was opened in 1979 and was extended to provide a link between central London and the Millennium Dome in 2000.

The Underground network serves 253 stations, with 507 trains (all of which are now one-person operated, except for the Northern Line which has retained about 400 guards pending the phasing in of a new fleet of trains). Trains run on over 244 miles of track, around 42 per cent of which are in tunnels. Of the 12 different lines, seven (Bakerloo, Central, Victoria, Waterloo and City, Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly) are 'deep-tube' and five (the Circle, District, Hammersmith and City, East London and Metropolitan) are 'sub-surface'. The number of passengers has increased dramatically from 800 million in 1988 to 896 million in 1999, with the system now carrying nearly as many passengers as the entire national railway network (LT, 1999). There are currently about 3 million passenger journeys per day, with the busiest Underground stations (in terms of passengers starting/ending journeys or changing between lines) being Kings Cross, Oxford Circus and Victoria, with 69, 85 and 86 million annual passengers respectively (LT, 1999; 2000).

London Underground Limited (LUL) is a wholly owned subsidiary of London Transport, which is responsible to the government for policy and performance. In 2000 LUL announced record profits of almost £294 million (2000a). This financial success reflects increased passenger demand (with passenger journeys growing by 7 per cent in the previous year alone) and the increased service levels (the number and frequency of trains) of almost 3 per cent which resulted (2000a). Despite this financial success, LUL has struggled for years with a tarnished image as passengers have been faced with having to battle daily with overcrowding, delays, cancellations,

unexplained stops in tunnels and out-of-order lifts and escalators. There is an urgent need for massive investment to replace old trains, extend lines and refurbish old equipment. In 1991 a Monopolies and Mergers Commission inquiry (MMC, 1991) found that 'for the most part, the deficiencies in the levels of [Underground] service are the result of chronic under-investment'. Indeed, LUL has a legacy of under-investment in the renewal of its infrastructure, compounded by cutbacks in subsidy by Conservative governments. An estimated £8 billion is required to upgrade the ailing network.

Following its election victory in 1997, the New Labour government announced a Public Private Partnership (PPP) to secure long-term secured levels of investment for London Underground. It will mean that part of London Underground will continue to operate as a publicly owned, publicly accountable body responsible for the actual running of train and station services, albeit in an entirely new form. From July 2000 London Transport's responsibilities for the provision of public transport services were transferred to the new Greater London Authority, with an executive arm *Transport for London* responsible for implementing transport policy. However, notwithstanding strong opposition to the Tube sell-off mounted by Ken Livingstone, both before and since his election as London Mayor, the Underground's infrastructure is to be 'mortgaged' to private sector companies who will take on leases of up to 30 years and be responsible for delivering a massive infrastructure investment programme. This will involve refurbishing stations, maintaining tunnels, replacing tracks, upgrading signalling and replacing trains to achieve prescribed service standards. TfL will own the new London Underground Operating Company (Opsco) which will be responsible for managing the partnership with the private sector infrastructure

companies (InfraCos). The private companies will make money by charging London Underground for access to the network. Significantly, although the time-scale has slipped dramatically as a result of its complexity and political sensitivity and is unlikely to become operational until after the next general election, the PPP structure of the project will keep the London Underground away from direct control by the Mayor for at least seven years.

In order to facilitate the transition the operational side of the Underground is currently undergoing restructuring, but throughout the 1990s LUL was organised into various functional structures (including trains, stations, and engineering), with operational services managed by 8 separate Underground Line-based business units, as well as individual managers responsible for each depot. Overall, the Underground employs almost 16,000 staff, including 2,500 drivers, 500 guards, 5,000 station staff, and 4,000 signal, track engineering, maintenance and workshop staff.

The workforce is quite mixed in terms of gender and ethnicity, although this is not spread evenly across the network. Thus, the vast majority of drivers are men, with only about 120 women. And both are overwhelmingly white, although some train depots, for example at Seven Sisters, have a majority of black drivers. By contrast, most station staff are black, with many immigrant workers, although the proportion of men and women is much more evenly balanced. Engineering staff are almost exclusively male with a fairly mixed ethnic composition. The vast majority of the LUL workforce are on full-time contracts. It is a predominately fairly young workforce, with an average age of mid-to-late 30s. Amongst station staff, the most poorly paid

section, there is a very high turnover of labour. All operating grades work a shift system, which stretches from one end of the day to another. For example, in a typical 4-week cycle train drivers are rostered to work anytime between 4.35am to 1.30am the following day, alternating between two-week early and two-week late turns. Station staff have similar shift patterns. By contrast, track maintenance, station and tunnel cleaners work mainly through the night after the network has been closed to the public.

Over 10,000 of London Underground's 16,000-strong workforce are members of trade unions, primarily the RMT and ASLEF¹. The RMT is an industrial union with about 6,500 members employed by LUL, overwhelmingly station, engineering and maintenance staff, but also about 600 drivers (mainly on the Victoria and Central Lines), as well as some 200 guards on the Northern line. ASLEF is an occupational union with about 2,000 members, almost all of whom are drivers and guards. The train drivers are undoubtedly the best-organised section on the Underground. This is partly related to their strategic bargaining position, which provides them with enormous potential power to paralyse the entire network through industrial action, and partly to their concentration in relatively large numbers at depots based at Tube stations, which provides a fairly cohesive organisation and collective group identity, with quite a high degree of interaction between drivers across different depots. This is reflected in almost 100 per cent trade membership amongst train drivers. By contrast, station staff are much less well organised, due to their fragmentation in fairly small units in hundreds of different centres. This is reflected in the relatively much lower levels of union organisation compared with train drivers or engineering staff based in depots located at Tube stations.

ASLEF's membership, overwhelmingly based amongst train drivers, is organised into 14 workplace union branches based on depots attached to Underground lines. There are some 40 ASLEF local reps. The different ASLEF workplace branches are linked together by a London District Council, but it is dominated by full-time officials and has little power or influence within the union. By contrast, the RMT has 16 union branches, most of which combine drivers, guards, station and engineering staff, and which are grouped around the 9 main Underground Lines. There are about 200 reps across the whole combine, including about 30 drivers' reps. Compared with ASLEF, the RMT's London Underground combine-wide District Council plays a much more important role in co-ordinating the activities of the different union branches and it exercises powerful leverage over the RMT executive committee member with responsibility for the London Underground and the full-time union officials based in head office.

Collective bargaining on day-to-day issues takes place between ASLEF and/or RMT reps and managers at depots and stations, on each Underground Line and at overall combine-wide level. Substantive pay and conditions negotiations affecting the entire London Underground workforce take place at a centralised level between full-time union officials and LUL management. But local rep organisation is much more problematic amongst station staff than drivers, given that union reps have responsibility for a group of Tube stations, with some representing eight, nine or even ten stations, and often do not receive time off work.

To fully appreciate the significance of the left's influence inside the RMT, and the contrast with ASLEF, it is necessary to consider the historical background to current events, to begin with exploring the important 1989 strike and the managerial restructuring of London Underground that followed in 1992.

THE 1989 DISPUTE AND 1992 COMPANY PLAN

Although many groups of other workers in a variety of industries were defeated in confrontations with the Conservative government and employers during the 1980s, the London Underground had a relatively more co-operative industrial relations atmosphere, at least until 1989. Throughout this period although public transport was included in the Conservative government's privatisation programme, no plans were revealed for London Underground. Moreover, the Tube's strategic role, serving the transport needs of millions of commuters in the country's capital, encouraged some managerial caution in encroaching too forcefully on union influence given the devastating impact any potential stoppage of work could have. But by the late 1980s London Transport came under intense financial pressure as a result of a continual reduction in government subsidies, which were cut by nearly half between 1984-88 (Urquhart, 1992). In turn, this obliged LUL management to seek cost savings, attempting to transform the long-established working practices, which it argued encouraged inefficiency.

In 1989 a new initiative called 'Action Stations' was announced, designed to introduce more flexible working practices and changes to the transfer and promotion

arrangements. Meanwhile, management also began to take stiffer disciplinary measures against 'unsatisfactory attendance', threatened to introduce more competitive tendering of maintenance and renewal work, and offered only a minimal pay rate for the introduction of One Person Operated trains (Urquhart, 1992). Faced with this management attack on pay and conditions, there was an immediate response by members and grassroots activists, with five unofficial one-day stoppages organised by NUR train staff (drivers and guards), which eventually led the union leadership to organise an official ballot for industrial action. Despite a High Court injunction enforcing a re-ballot, there was an overwhelming majority in favour of action, leading to six 24-hour strikes. Meanwhile, inside ASLEF, there was an even more determined membership revolt, with a series of 8 one-day unofficial stoppages by train staff, before the union balloted its members and organised a further four official one-day strikes (involving a number of joint days of action between the two unions).

A number of non-party affiliated left-wing ASLEF driver activists on the Piccadilly Line, who had been involved in producing a regular 12-page *Picc up on the East* bulletin for a number of years arguing for militant union action independently of union officials, were central to the unofficial strikes' initiation. They also helped organise regular mass meetings of strikers with 'co-ordinators' from across all the London Underground depots. The acceptance by the ASLEF and the NUR national leadership of the compromise recommendations of a mediators' panel caused considerable bitterness and a further unofficial strike by ASLEF train staff, although in the process management was forced to concede virtually all its productivity goals (Beardwell, 1989; Woodward, 1998).

In 1992 LUL pressed ahead with a systematic plan to introduce completely new contracts of employment and working arrangements across the whole network. These involved more flexible shift patterns (involving longer working hours), shorter holidays, new payment systems, the end of promotion through seniority and the introduction of new 'unsatisfactory attendance' procedures. It also aimed for a reduction of the workforce by one quarter, with a significant cutback in the number of drivers. In addition, management drew up proposals to reconstruct fundamental elements of its industrial relations system with a devolution of collective bargaining structures. The combined package of changes, known as the *Company Plan* was presented to the unions virtually *fait accompli* with little negotiation. It represented a major challenge to workers' conditions and threatened to seriously weaken union strength. ASLEF mounted no real resistance, fearing to jeopardise the relatively high redundancy packages that some of its older drivers were set to receive. Following a series of angry union branch meetings, the RMT obtained a massive ballot vote in favour of strike action. But apprehensive of the negative political consequences of taking action on the Labour Party's chances of winning the May 1992 general election, and after obtaining an assurance that Labour would have the *Company Plan* withdrawn in the event of victory, the RMT officials held back from organising action. When the Conservative government was re-elected they abandoned resistance, and the *Company Plan* was introduced at the end of the year, obliging all staff to sign new personal contracts. An East Finchley ASLEF activist related:

The unions were hoping that Labour would win the election and that would solve all their problems, but of course the Tories were elected and then everyone said 'We're doomed'.

With the Tories in power there was a feeling of inevitability about it. And in the run-up to Christmas we were just slapped with new contracts and told 'Sign them or you're out in January'. There was no organised resistance by the unions whatsoever. They said we wouldn't be able to stop it through one-day strikes like in 1989, it would have to be all-out, and that wasn't going to happen, so we'd have to accept it.

The imposition of the *Company Plan* represented a serious defeat for union organisation on the Underground (although its passage was sweetened by a subsequent significant pay rise of 6 per cent for train staff). During 1993-4 some 5,000 jobs were lost, including about 400 drivers. Confronted with new collective bargaining machinery, both unions were thrown into some disarray. Ironically though, the sweeping job cuts which occurred in the wake of the *Company Plan* not only lowered the average age of the workforce, but also gradually led to the emergence of a new layer of left-wing union activists to prominence.

THE RISE OF THE LEFT AND THE GROWTH OF RESISTANCE: 1992-1997

Over twenty of the leading RMT and ASLEF senior reps and branch officers on the Underground, some of whom had been responsible for collective bargaining under the old structure, retired or took voluntary redundancy. But there was a marked divergence in the impact on both unions. Inside ASLEF, if anything there was a political shift to the right. Some of the key left-wing activists who had organised the unofficial action in 1989 either accepted redundancy or took up new management jobs that became available, and the vacant union positions tending to be filled by less militant individuals. But inside the RMT there was the gradual coalescence of a

new formation of left-wing political activists at grassroots level, who were determined to re-build the strength of the union through organising rear-guard opposition to management.

A key event in this process was the sacking of a Trotskyite RMT driver activist, and Leytonstone Station union rep, Pat Sikorski in the summer of 1993. A ballot and one-day strike by Central Line drivers and guards, and the threat of escalation across the whole combine, forced management to reinstate him. The sacking was seen as blatant victimisation by management, and the union's victory considerably boosted the morale of activists generally. Sikorski was catapulted into prominence and elected onto the national union executive and later became secretary of the London Underground RMT Regional Council. In these positions he was to play a central organising role encouraging other left-wing RMT branch activists and union reps to build up militant union opposition to management. During the early 1990s, the left inside the RMT on the Underground was composed of about 20-30 individuals, including two or three Trotskyists and ex-members of the Communist Party and a larger grouping of Labour Party left-wingers, although most could be described as independent non-party industrial militants. This left-wing influence became most evident on the Regional Council, which (dominated by drivers, the best-organised section) began to play a principal role in the adoption of official militant union policies towards management and the co-ordination of the activities of the hitherto fragmented union branches. Although operating primarily as a network of *industrial* militants, rather than more explicitly *political*, it also wielded sufficient official union authority to lead a combine-wide campaign of strike action to defend pay and conditions over the next few years.

But the union militancy that ensued was also related to perceived intransigent managerial policy. Thus, LUL management continued to attempt to assert its authority within the industrial relations arena at combine-wide level, with the aim of introducing further efficiency measures, in the process creating a continuing brittle relationship with both main unions. However, they utilised a classic divide-and-rule negotiating strategy aimed at stymieing the potential of united action between the RMT and ASLEF. This was done by playing on the differences in bargaining position between the two unions and being prepared to concede more generous concessions to drivers (mainly organised by ASLEF) compared with other sections. As one Employee Relations manager, who was interviewed, explained: 'Our attitude has been to try and work in co-operation with ASLEF because we recognise, and it might be a bit cynical, that the train drivers have more power than anybody to stop our services'. A pattern of disputes ensued in which the RMT, attempting to represent station and engineering staff as well as drivers, adopted a more militant stance.

In 1994 both ASLEF and RMT threatened industrial action in response to a 2 per cent pay offer, but when it was increased by half a per cent after negotiations at ACAS, ASLEF accepted the deal. They argued it was the best that could be achieved given the generally unfavourable economic and political climate. By contrast, the RMT, concerned about conditions of work as much as about pay levels for its multi-grade members, balloted for 24-hour strike action amongst its entire Underground membership. The RMT Regional Council, under the influence of its left-wing elements, campaigned amongst the members with a series of mass meetings on the basis that LUL was a highly profitable organisation and that industrial action

could force management to make concessions, irrespective of ASLEF's decision. In a number of large union branches they won this argument. But although the union obtained an overwhelming majority vote in favour, it was on a low turn-out and the strike was very patchy, with LUL claiming they were able to run three quarters of its train services with only one Tube station having to close. In so far as the RMT, left isolated by ASLEF, ended up accepting the original offer, the dispute achieved little. Nonetheless, many union activists, even beyond those on the left, viewed it as very important in 'laying the ghost of 1992' and demonstrating the union could still mount combine-wide action against management. Determined to punish the RMT for such belligerence, management (using one union branch's alleged procedural irregularity) withdrew the union pay-roll check-off facility across the network, whilst leaving it intact for ASLEF. It had the immediate effect of reducing RMT membership by a few hundred across the combine, although it also obliged the new union reps to go out and build a closer relationship with the workforce.

The 1995 annual pay and conditions campaign further emboldened the strength of the RMT, and its increasingly left-led Regional Council on the Underground. On this occasion, both ASLEF and the RMT obtained massive strike ballot majorities in response to what was regarded as a highly insulting 2.75 per cent pay offer from management, and announced a joint 24-hour strike. However, ASLEF called their strike off when LUL obtained a High Court injunction making the union's participation illegal on the basis that its ballot paper wording had been nullified by an improved company offer of 3 per cent. The RMT then decided to abandon its own planned strike, even though it was unaffected by the injunction as its ballot wording had been more general. Following further negotiations, ASLEF obtained a promised

one-hour reduction in the working week, as well as 3 per cent pay increase for drivers, and recommended acceptance of the deal by its members. It represented a significant concession by management to the drivers, and was clearly designed to isolate the RMT. Nonetheless, the RMT went ahead and organised three 24-hour combine-wide stoppages of its entire membership in a campaign for a 6 per cent pay rise, for a reduction in the working week for *other* grades of staff, and to improve specified conditions of work. The RMT Regional Council campaigned vigorously to bolster support for the action, with its left-wing members again addressing a series of specially organised union branch meetings across the network, and distributing thousands of agitational leaflets in every station and depot. Central to their argument was that as a broad-based 'industrial union' it was necessary to defy management's strategy of attempting to 'buy-off' the drivers whilst 'holding the line' for other sections. Not everybody agreed with the action. As one moderate RMT Regional Council rep argued:

Things can be gained without necessarily going to the wire every time...I don't agree with a hell of a lot of what management do, but when you talk to them you can bring management towards your view. And even if it is only a little way, you are getting something you wouldn't have got had you not talked to them.

Nonetheless, unlike the previous year, the response by RMT members was solid and each strike saw the cancellation of about 50 per cent of peak-time services and the closing of a number of Tube stations. The effectiveness of the strike was considerably enhanced when dozens of ASLEF drivers, unhappy about crossing RMT picket lines, transferred (or took out dual) membership of the RMT to enable them to join the action. Under the bold slogan 'Joint Now, Strike Now', printed on

posters and leaflets, the RMT Regional Council were also able to recruit about 700 new members amongst station staff and other sections. When the RMT threatened to escalate the action by calling a 48-hour stoppage, LUL successfully sought an interim injunction banning the union from calling on newly-recruited members from striking, because they had not taken part in the original ballot which sanctioned it. The RMT called off its planned 48-hour stoppage, but threatened to organise a new ballot for action with a wider franchise. The dispute was finally resolved when management conceded a reduction in the working week to 40 hours for non-train staff. It represented a significant gain and appeared to vindicate the arguments of those left activists inside the RMT generally and the Regional Council specifically who campaigned for militant resistance to management.

This process was further encouraged with the formation of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) the following year. The SLP was set up in the wake of the Labour Party's annual conference decision to remove Clause Four from the party's constitution, on the basis of far-left politics. It's formation struck a chord amongst a small minority of workers disillusioned with Blair's New Labour project, and the organisation pulled around it over 2,000 members across the country. It's support was particularly strong inside the RMT on London Underground, where within a short period of time about 20 leading union activists had joined the new party, including Pat Sikorski, (secretary of the London Underground Regional Council) who became vice-president of the SLP, John Leach (national union executive member for the London Underground), and Bob Crow (ex-Underground worker and RMT Assistant-General Secretary with responsibility for the Underground) who became chair of the SLP-initiated United Campaign to Repeal the Anti-Trade Union Laws². The SLP

were able to claim support amongst many Regional Council delegates (mainly drivers) and half of the 11 members of the union's national executive. This new left-wing political grouping, which now had a well-organised chain of influence stretching from union reps into the union branches to the Regional Council through to the full-time official and union executive, was to play an influential leadership role on the Underground, providing an industrial strategy of militant opposition to management backed up with a left-wing political edge. A small number of individual union reps from various Trotskyist organisations, despite political differences with the SLP, were broadly supportive of the Regional Council's approach on industrial questions, and were themselves able to influence policy and activity in some union branches. Significantly, what united these different elements was a concentration on building up the strength of shopfloor organisation and confidence through collective struggle, as opposed to the traditional Communist Party 'Broad Left' emphasis on attempting to capture positions in the official union machine.

The first fruits of this organisation was to be seen almost immediately with the 1996 annual pay and conditions claim, although, paradoxically, it was ASLEF who initiated industrial action on this occasion. Despite an increased pay offer from 2.7 to 3.2 per cent, the ASLEF leadership came under tremendous pressure from their driver members, who had become intensely frustrated at what they regarded as management's attempt to renege on the previous years agreement to cut the working week and by the failure to move towards the longer term aim of a 35-hour week. The union balloted its 2,000 members and organised three official 24-hour stoppages that effectively paralysed most of the Underground service. As an ASLEF driver on the Northern Line recalled:

The main thing after the *Company Plan* was the issue of a 5-day week for train staff. 1995 had ended up in bitterness with the management promising that the 35-hour week was just around the corner. But when '96 came they didn't agree to it. In '96 the [ASLEF] Executive Committee member [for the Underground] was up for re-election and he was under pressure to deliver. We had been losing some of the best activists to the RMT over previous disputes, and the activists were getting more and more pissed off, and the reps were getting grief from the members. So at the very start of the '96 pay round ASLEF went straight to ballot, which is what RMT had done before. They tried to leapfrog the RMT in terms of militancy and organised a number of one-day stoppages. Management were in shock, they didn't think it was going to happen. But the full-time officials were in a position where they had to deliver or their own personal positions were on the line.

Despite being outmanoeuvred, the RMT Regional Council quickly organised a ballot of its own driver members (employed mainly on the Victoria and Central Lines) and then, establishing a fragile united front, organised with ASLEF a further four joint 24-hour stoppages of work, on these occasions bringing the whole Underground network to a halt. For the first time since 1989 there was some effective solidarity between ASLEF and RMT drivers, with joint picket lines. This was a direct result of an explicit united front initiative taken by the left activists inside the RMT. However, another planned joint strike was called off after ASLEF's leadership recommended acceptance of LUL's improved three-year pay and hours package, which included a reduction of the working week to 35 hours for drivers by 1998, albeit in exchange for two years' wage settlements at 2 per cent below the inflation rate. A threat of further unilateral strike action by the RMT was withdrawn after last minute talks when some further concessions were obtained on the deal. Although self-financing, the hours reduction, and the substantial increase in train staffing that followed, represented a

significant victory despite management belligerence (LUL, 1996). Nonetheless, the differences over the settlement negotiations had the effect of re-igniting old rivalries between the members of the two unions.

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST PRIVATISATION: 1998-1999

In 1997 there were two further RMT strike ballots over the annual pay claim, until management imposed a 2.7 per cent increase on non-train staff, and the following year the RMT organised two one-day stoppages of guards on the Northern Line over the phasing out of jobs. Otherwise during 1998-9, the main battleground became the campaign against the Public Private Partnership (PPP) of the Underground advocated by the New Labour government. Following the announcement of PPP in March 1998, ASLEF (whose driver members were regarded as not being directly affected) argued the need to take a pragmatic view. General Secretary Lew Adams insisted that only by involving the private sector could money be obtained for the Tube. 'ASLEF will not play at ostrich and oppose a public-private investment package. It seems currently to be the only game in town' (*Evening Standard*, 10 March 1998). Despite concern over future job cuts, the union refused to organise any action against PPP. By contrast, the RMT mounted vigorous industrial and political opposition from the outset, on the basis that it should remain a publicly-owned industry. It demanded London Underground guarantee the job security of the 4,000 engineering and train maintenance staff threatened with transfer to the private sector, and promise their existing terms and conditions of employment (including pay, hours, holidays and pensions) be honoured, with no compulsory redundancies.

So as to avoid any legal challenge for organising industrial action on a 'political' basis, and as a means of galvanising support for its threatened engineering members amongst drivers and station staff, the RMT linked opposition to PPP with a fight for the annual pay and conditions claim. This included the demand for a 35-hour week for *all* staff (and a four-day/32-hour week for drivers *already on* a 35-hour week) and the withdrawal of a new late and absence procedure. However, the semi-privatisation threat was seen as the key area of concern for the union, with little immediate prospect of winning the other issues. Again the Regional Council campaigned across the network, with a series of much larger than usual union branch meetings that subsequently pulled a wide layer of members into leafleting and agitational activity amongst the broader membership. Following a 5-1 ballot majority the union organised one 24-hour and one 48-hour combine-wide stoppages of its entire 6,500-strong membership in the summer of 1998, on both occasions closing about two dozen stations and cutting services by half on some Underground lines during the rush hour. A Regional Council bulletin replied to the accusation it was attempting to propagate its own left-wing political aims:

This, of course, is the oldest one in the book and it is used on a regular basis by LUL management...to attempt to deflect attention from the real issues. If by opposing the government's plans for the future of LUL, which passengers, Londoners, and even the City of London know are wrong and which will destroy our members' jobs, conditions, pensions and futures, it is meant that we are political, left-wingers or even revolutionary, then so be it!

Again, not everyone agreed with this militant approach. One moderate RMT member on the Victoria Line insisted:

My personal opinion is that their tactics were ultra-left, they have been into battle quite often without looking to see if anyone is behind them...And I think management were thinking 'Go ahead and fight, we know there will be disruption for a day or two but it's not going to kill us. But the lack of effect will damage the members' morale.

The left inside the RMT, especially Sikorski and Crow, the two leading figures, responded with the argument that, like the miners in 1984-5, the RMT had no choice but to fight given the nature of the attack they faced. 'We have to fight under circumstances not of our choosing, but unless we fight we're going to get completely walked over' was the essence of the argument that was carried inside the union. Further stoppages over New Year were called off after LUL successfully sought a High Court injunction on the basis that the union had left too long a gap between the previous stoppages and the planned strikes, and should re-ballot its members. But a new strike ballot early in 1999 produced an 85 per cent vote in favour of action, and the 48-hour strike, which was described as 'unreasonable, unnecessary and damaging to the long-term future of the Underground' by Transport Minister John Reid (*Evening Standard*, 16 February 1999), again severely affected services.

However, the campaign of industrial action came to an end, despite a further consultative ballot of members showing an overwhelming majority against semi-privatisation, when it became clear the union could not sustain support for further strike action amongst its drivers (a number of whom on the Central Line left the RMT to join ASLEF). The willingness of RMT drivers to take industrial action previously, given that PPP was not seen as directly affecting *their* jobs and conditions, revealed a high level of solidarity with other engineering-based union members. It was a vivid

testimony to the left's success in their appeal for united action of *all* workers across the network. Yet in the face of determined management opposition, supported by the New Labour government, a number of drivers saw little value in further stoppages of work, at least until the details of the private sector transfer became apparent. In many respects this revealed the limitations of the left inside the union, as one sympathetic Victoria Line member explained:

You have an RMT leadership that desperately wants to fight and wants to try and galvanise the membership to fight the kind of political struggle that is needed. But they have a membership that is a lot less sure. The leadership are well to the left of the membership, and the membership are not convinced of having a political strike. They make rational decisions about 'Am I going to get something back for all the money I'm losing'. But it is very difficult to see how you are going to stop privatisation through limited strike action anyway.

In the meantime, the union launched a new broader political campaign of opposition to New Labour's privatisation plans aimed at galvanising public opinion and support from a wider layer of Underground passengerst. With Ken Livingstone's candidacy for Mayor of the new London Assembly effectively becoming a referendum on the issue, the RMT Regional Council set up a Campaign Against Tube Privatisation which stood eleven union officials and activists in different constituencies across London, polling 17,400 votes (1 per cent), although it eschewed a joint political campaign with the (more successful) newly-formed London Socialist Alliance.

ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

After outlining the changing contours of industrial relations and trade unionism on the London Underground over the last few years, it is now possible to reconsider the two central research questions, namely to what extent is left-wing political leadership important and is militant unionism self-defeating?

First, the case study provides strong evidence of the significant leadership role played by left-wing political activists inside the RMT on the London Underground. The left has clearly been instrumental in shaping the union's militant stance towards management and in mobilising the membership to engage in industrial action over the last few years. Since 1991 the Regional Council has organised no less than 19 strike ballots with 17 days of action, a marked contrast with ASLEF's record over the same period. Of course, this militancy has not merely been a reflection of the preferences of the union's left leadership, unaffected by external constraints and pressures. Thus, London Underground management's general industrial relations belligerence (particularly towards the RMT) and the impending threat posed to jobs and conditions by privatisation, have all acted to sustain such militancy and create conditions in which there has been little basis for the type of 'social partnership' advocated by many commentators. Similarly, the monopoly public service context in which Underground passenger demand and services have continued to grow rapidly, and where the hard-faced realities of viability and compulsory redundancies common to many other industries have been felt less acutely, has encouraged workers' self-confidence and provided favourable opportunity structures for collective action. The RMT's broader-based union

membership and weaker bargaining position compared with ASLEF, also needs to be taken into account in explaining why they have engaged in strike action so frequently.

On the other hand, workers did not just respond automatically to environmental opportunities (and limitations). On the contrary, the role of union leadership in focusing workers' varied grievances upon common objectives to ensure united action was also of central importance. Certainly, it would be mistaken to ignore or downplay the significance of the conscious layer of left-wing RMT activists who have also contributed to shaping the contours of trade unionism on the Underground in a distinctively adversarial fashion.

This influence was particularly evident during 1996-9, when the Socialist Labour Party's advocacy of militant industrial struggle, supported by other individual Trotskyist activists, appears to have fitted a situation where many union members felt the only alternative to resistance would be capitulation and the collapse of union organisation. In this sense, the development of a layer of left-wing activists reflected something very real inside the RMT on London Underground. In turn, this network of left activists played a crucial role in successfully articulating the wider memberships sense of injustice, targeting it at management and organising repeated bouts of collective action. They were able to do so in a context in which there does not appear to have been the same degree of separation of union activists from the shop-floor as is common in many other industries (which often makes it impossible to carry the arguments to each individual worker) and yet in circumstances where the

organised left, again unlike elsewhere, has also been well represented at every level of union organisation from local rep through to the national executive.

Of course, it is true the willingness of ASLEF members to vote in favour of, and sometimes engage in, strike action despite the lack of a left political leadership similar to that inside the RMT, provides evidence of the *objective* scale of bitterness many London Underground workers have felt towards management in recent years. But the contrast between the two unions in terms of the sheer level and nature of combativity is to be explained not merely in terms of management's differential approach or the unions' relative bargaining positions, but also by the extent to which there have been a *subjective* layer of left-wing activists inside the RMT workforce capable of standing up and arguing with their fellow workers, pressing a course of action different to that proposed by more moderate individuals, and enthusing workers with both the ideological legitimacy and practical confidence to resist management.

In 1999 the left's influence inside the union more broadly was reflected in union elections for a number of key national positions in which both the SLP and (the Trotskyist) Socialist Outlook stood candidates against existing officials, including the General Secretary, Jimmy Knapp. Campaigning on the basis that Knapp and others had showed a lack of vigour in fighting PPP, and were wary of distancing themselves too much from the Labour government, the left received very high votes in support. For example, Pat Sikorski came very close to defeating sitting candidate Vernon Hince (vice-chairman of the Labour Party and a member of Labour's National Executive Committee) for Assistant General Secretary³. By contrast, the left does not

have a base on the Underground inside ASLEF. As one isolated ASLEF socialist driver explained:

It's very difficult to find left activists in ASLEF [on the Underground]. Because the RMT has much more militant rhetoric – it says 'we're an industrial union not a craft union' – there is a tendency for the best Left people to join the RMT. Which in turn leaves the right in control of ASLEF.

However, significantly, more recently the SLP project has recently begun to fray at the edges. Individual members SLP members on the RMT executive have been criticised for fudging their differences with Jimmy Knapp to avoid undermining his links with the Labour Party leadership. On the Underground, the cohesiveness of SLP organisation has been undermined by political and tactical disputes, and some members have left the organisation including Sikorski, who has recently been disciplined by the national executive for alleged 'unofficial' electoral activity. Meanwhile, the party generally has been plagued by feuds over policy and the level of internal democracy.

Second, there is the question of a militant union strategy. In terms of Kelly's (1996) definition of militancy, based on ambitious demands, strong reliance on mobilisation of union membership, emphasis on collective bargaining, the frequent threat or use of industrial action, and an ideology of conflicting interests, the RMT on London Underground has undoubtedly been a 'militant' union during the 1990s, and its membership have responded in kind. As Bob Crow, RMT Assistant General Secretary with responsibility for the Underground explained:

We believe in a fighting union, that you get more benefits and win concessions from the employers if the members are prepared to take action. We've probably had more strike ballots than the rest of the trade union movement put together. And we've never lost one of them.

But this still leaves the argument as to the efficacy of union militancy. In some respects it is difficult to make a judgement on this by comparing the RMT with ASLEF, given their rather different bargaining positions and treatment by management. It could be argued that each union was merely following the strategy that was most appropriate to its situation. Yet arguably it is still possible, and useful, to make some comparisons about the *effect* of the RMT's militant strategy. On this the evidence from the case study appears to be mixed. On the one hand, there have been a number of strengths. For example, it is evident that RMT union/labour militancy has achieved some real material gains, for example in 1996 it was crucial to finally achieving a significant cut in the working week for drivers and winning concessions for other grades. Moreover, even when material improvements have not been made, militancy appears to have helped to defend existing conditions from attack and prevented the victimisation of a leading activist. An RMT member on the Victoria Line explained:

The left has a huge influence in the RMT and it means that there has been a political campaign against privatisation that has made people politically aware. At a time when the industry as a whole has been massively battered, with huge job losses on BR, the fact that RMT have fought all the time has meant that management have been more slow in pushing things through than they would have been anyway. People are a lot better off than they might have been because RMT have fought, in terms of defending basic working conditions.

Whilst RMT militancy has been doubled-edged in terms of union recruitment, leading to some gains in 1996 (of a few hundred) and losses in 1999 (of a few dozen), it has generally helped to build the strength and vitality of collective union organisation in terms of the numbers of activists involved and the level of political discussion in the union branches. As an ASLEF member on the Piccadilly Line acknowledged:

They have built a lot of good trade unionists, they have developed some new people from below, a group of activists. They have good leaflets and political propaganda coming out, and they send people around the system leafleting and signing up new members. They have involved people in action. And that has had an impact in keeping union structures alive at a time when they have been fighting on the defensive all the time. It is quite possible that without this willingness to fight, the union organisation could have become completely passive and simply a rubber stamp for management.

In addition, the RMT militancy has put some pressure on the ASLEF leadership from sections of their members unhappy with a more cautious approach, reflected in the important election of a SLP member as General Secretary.

On the other hand, there have also been some significant weaknesses. The most important of these are the traditional sectional divisions between the RMT and ASLEF. On its own, the RMT are unable to deliver a fully effective strike. To do so would require stopping the trains completely and that would require winning joint action with ASLEF members, if necessary appealing to them to act in defiance of their own union leadership. But the RMT left has not contributed to achieving this, as one union activist on the Piccadilly Line acknowledged:

The relationship between RMT and ASLEF is diabolical, really low. There is a whole history, a huge number of disputes in which [the RMT] has said 'Come out on strike and support us, join the RMT'. It's usually a poaching exercise and that breaks down into personally slagging people off, and it has become very bitter. Although the left in the RMT have said they want to build bridges with ASLEF to get unity in action, in reality the bitterness from all the disputes has led them to say that ASLEF is the main enemy. The main problem is that drivers are clearly the strongest section, they can close the network down on their own. RMT can't close the Underground down. So strikes aren't that effective, because drivers are going into work. So then it's: 'ASLEF are to blame'.

The problem has been compounded by RMT unwillingness to try and build a permanent close relationship with ASLEF activists, and to encourage the development of a left current than could challenge the ASLEF leadership from below. The RMT left's approach has proved counter-productive in terms of exacerbating sectional divisions that have only benefited management. However, it is possible the election of a new left-wing ASLEF General Secretary may herald a change in this relationship, reflected by a jointly organised political publicity campaign against PPP ('Listen to London – Save Our Tube') launched in August 1999 by leaders of both unions.

Another weakness has been that the RMT's militancy has been conducted within a very unfavourable environment in terms of trade union confidence and strike activity generally in Britain. Certainly, the problems recently encountered in mounting opposition to PPP have highlighted the limits of left-wing leadership in overcoming some members concerns about the immediate costs and benefits involved in

sustaining industrial action when the overall chances of success seem slim. An ASLEF member on the Northern Line explained:

The problem is that RMT are trying to pursue a big political strategy at a time when the working class as a whole is extremely passive. If you can't have socialism in one country then you can't have revolutionary trade union strategy in one part of industry. The consciousness of workers on the Underground is affected not just by what happens on the Underground but also by the whole world around them. They are affected by the *Evening Standard*, which says 'these are just a bunch of left-wingers with political aims'. And Britain has the lowest level of strikes ever. So it is very difficult for the RMT. Because the scale of the fight that is needed against all the attacks is so huge it needs much larger working class resistance to pull it off. Fighting in one isolated group is extremely difficult...The RMT can't even deliver all-out action against PPP, they can only muster one-day strikes, but it is very difficult to see how that's going to stop privatisation.

If the public sector monopoly context has encouraged a higher degree of workers' confidence and willingness to engage in militant activity compared with most other industries, the general retreat of the British working class movement, combined with the rejection of militancy and acceptance of 'Social Partnership' by many unions, has undoubtedly conditioned and constrained its potential success. Despite the left's influence within the RMT, it has proved to be too small and insufficiently rooted amongst the mass of members to overcome such broader contextual limitations. In addition, there has also been the subjective weakness of the left's predominately *industrial*-based form of agitation that has only recently recognised the need to be part of a much broader *political* campaign with other social forces and movements. Even if, despite such problems, militant trade unionism generally on the London Underground has been relatively successful in the

past, it may prove much more difficult in the *future* within a more hostile and part-privatised environment.

Although the RMT's militant strategy has had mixed fortunes the scale of the challenge posed by London Underground has meant that RMT survival has to a considerable degree depended upon the willingness of the membership to defend the union from attack by engaging in collective action. By contrast, a rather different type of pragmatic and sectional trade unionism has delivered some gains for ASLEF. But this appears to have had more to do with their more strategic bargaining position compared with the RMT, management's attempt to use them (as an 'elite' union with an homogeneous membership embracing the bulk of drivers) as a wedge to split the RMT (with its broader worker representation), and with ASLEF's willingness to threaten and occasionally engage in industrial action (sometimes benefiting from RMT militancy), than as a consequence of any more moderate union strategy. Moreover, ASLEF's alternative approach has merely fed the sectional divisions between the unions, something that could become even more problematic with the introduction of PPP and the fragmentation of bargaining between different companies that will ensue.

In conclusion, whilst Kelly (1996) seems justified in arguing that militant trade unionism is ultimately sustained by the hostility of employers to independent trade unionism and by the antagonistic interests of workers and employers, the London Underground provides further evidence of the process by which left-wing political leadership can also play a crucial role in mobilising workers collectively to resist management. It also suggests that the much-heralded New Labour/TUC model of

'social partnership' is likely to continue to be challenged by so-called 'old-fashioned' traditions of industrial militancy, even if this militancy appears to be confined (at the moment at least) to only certain industries. Whilst the distinctive public-sector monopoly service context of the London Underground (as in the Royal Mail and Fire Service) goes some way to explaining this resilience, it seems justifiable to suggest that without much more extensive research into the influence that left-wing activists can exert in the workplace and unions, the merits of different industrial and political strategies vis-à-vis management will remain only a partially understood phenomena.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank John Kelly, John Dobson and three anonymous referees for their helpful comments with this article.

NOTES

¹ The other main union is the Transport Salaried Staff Association with about 1,000 members on the Underground.

² The United Campaign to Repeal the Anti-Trade Union Laws was founded in at a conference held in March 1998. Its three objectives are to secure the repeal of all the Conservatives trade union laws, to secure the introduction of new laws which enshrine the right of workers to take industrial action, and to support workers and unions penalised or threatened by union legislation. A number of trade unions have backed the campaign, including RMT, ASLEF, NUM, FBU, BFAWU and UCATT.

³ SLP member and executive member Mick Atherton stood for President against a Labour stalwart, John Cogger; Socialist Outlook supporter and ex-Lambeth councillor Greg Tucker stood for General Secretary against long-standing RMT leader Jimmy Knapp (winning 4,535 votes to 8,776); and Pat Sikorski, the SLP's former Vice-President, stood for Assistant General Secretary against Vernon Hince, vice-chairman of the Labour Party and a member of Labour's National Executive Committee (winning 4,521 votes to 5,421). Jimmy Knapp, who polled 66 per cent of the vote, described his re-election as 'a major defeat for those on the ultra-left who put their politics above the interests of union members' (*Evening Standard*, 1 April 1999).

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