

Tube workers sold out

By a Hammersmith and City Line driver and a Northern Line guard

ANGRY is not the word for the feelings of tube workers after the defeat of their fight for a shorter working week. They are particularly bitter because they feel cheated. A majority of train crew workers who voted on the settlement rejected the £1,500 year pay cut demanded by the tube bosses to compensate them for the cut in hours.

Despite the vote against settlement on those terms, industrial action was called off because ASLEF voted by a narrow majority to accept the deal and the RMT leadership — who had a whopping 4-1 majority to continue the action — felt that they couldn't hold the strike together because ASLEF members would cross the picket lines.

How could this happen?

How has it come about that one of the most powerful groups of workers in Britain has gone down to defeat, when defeat was eminently avoidable, and victory still demonstrably possible?

We could have won this battle! London Underground management were on the ropes. Bosses across London were losing more than £100 million in profits every strike day. The tube itself was losing perhaps £20 million a day in revenue. Train crew were more united, across grade and union, than ever before. Public support remained strong despite the Tories' propaganda and the agitation of the *London Evening Standard*. Not even the ham-fisted intervention of Labour Front Bencher David Blunkett who called for binding arbitration, managed to dent the morale of the strikers.

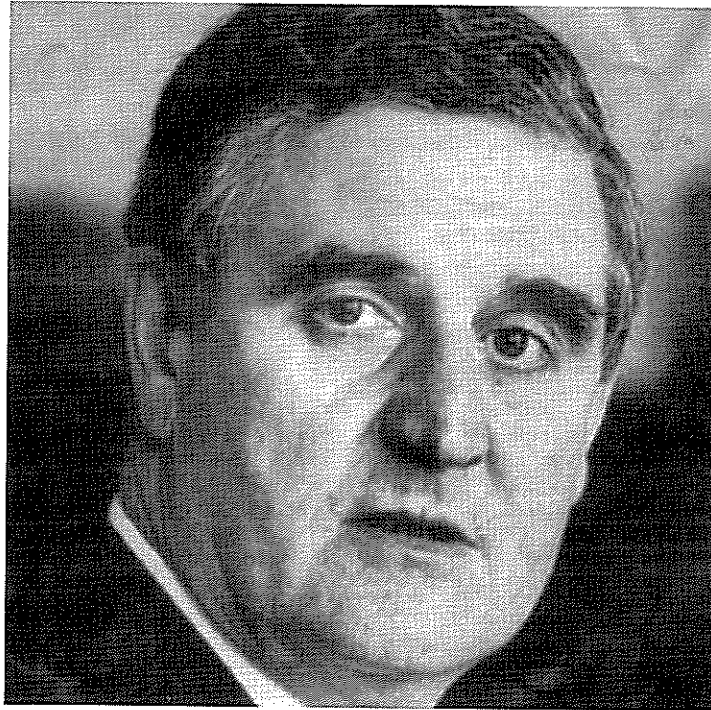
We were defeated, as so often before, by our own wretchedly disloyal no-guts trade union leadership. The ASLEF top brass are seriously infected with sectionalism, craftism and company unionism — that is, with more than their share of good old-fashioned fat-arsed trade union bureaucrat stupidity! Look at the record.

After half a dozen one-day strikes the dispute showed no serious signs of losing momentum. Then, for some unexplained reason, the ASLEF leaders decided to "take the initiative". These workers' leaders raised the truly bizarre proposal that their members take a wage cut to finance the shorter-working week for which they were fighting!

Things got even stranger when the RMT leadership, without any reference to rank-and-file tube activists, decided to go along with this, abandoning the union's crystal clear policy for a shorter working week with no strings and no loss of pay!

Thus, "negotiations" started. "Agreement" was, naturally, easy to reach once the tube union leaders had thrown out of the window their entire case for a shorter working week, paid for out of London Underground's enormous multi-million profits.

Senior negotiators of both unions set to working out "acceptable" pay cuts for their own members! ASLEF leaders thought they could get away with cutting a grand and a half from their members' pay packets. The "left" RMT alternative? The Socialist Labour Party's leading RMT activist Bob Crow preferred a



ASLEF leader Lew Adams: negotiated a wage cut!

cut of £800 or so: that is the measure of the wretchedness of the *entire* RMT leadership!

This avoidable and therefore tragic defeat illustrates perfectly one of the central problems in the trade unions today: the crisis of working-class leadership. It was not that the tube workers did not want to fight, or that they had no clear idea of what they wanted — the vote of the majority to reject the sell-out deal shows that the problem was that the leaders did not have the will and determination to defeat London Underground management. Nor did they have the political and economic arguments necessary to challenge London Underground head-on.

A victory for the tube workers could have radically transformed the balance of forces in the industrial class

struggle, giving heart and confidence to wide layers of workers, proving to them that militant direct action brings results.

What lessons can we draw from this experience?

We need a strong rank-and-file organisation on the tube, linking militants across the industry.

A tube workers' rank-and-file movement would focus on three things:

- On the need to democratise the main unions: ASLEF, TSSA and the RMT. Despite having an excellent rule book, RMT has a very bad history of calling off strikes without the voted consent of the rank-and-file.

- On winning all tube unions away from the politics of company unionism, and putting the interests of tube worker, and the wider working class at the top of their agenda.

- On promoting cross-union unity at all levels, as the first stage towards a proper industrial union for all tube and rail workers.

Beyond these immediate demands we have to re-orient the key layer of stewards, reps and union activists to the long-term goal of renovating the labour movement from top to bottom, and in particular to opening the unions up to real accountability and control by the members

Support the train guards and conductors!

As we go to press RMT guards and senior conductors have started a campaign of discontinuous strike action to win proper meal and toilet breaks.

The action is slowly spreading through the different Train Operating Companies. The key to victory is solidarity. Drivers must refuse to cover the critical safety work normally done by guards and conductors. If they do, trains will move!

Drivers: don't scab! Victory is still possible!