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London Underground faces strike action

By Mark Odell, Transport Correspondent



London Underground was bracing itself for a strike by one of its unions after members voted for industrial action over plans to close all Tube ticket offices.

The Rail Maritime and Transport union said 77 per cent of those members who voted had backed industrial action, which could start in a week's time. But turnout was low, with the RMT confirming that 40 per cent of members voted.

TfL announced in November that it planned to close all ticket offices at the 240 stations on the network as part of radical revamp of the system that also includes plans to run 24-hour services on some lines at weekends from 2015.

The closures would lead to a net loss of 750 jobs among the 5,750 station staff, which the management aims to achieve through voluntary redundancy.

The Transport Salaried Staffs Association union is also planning to ballot its members in the coming weeks.

"RMT members on London Underground have voted by a massive majority for both strike action and action short of a strike in a dispute which is wholly about cash-led cuts plans that would see the axing of nearly 1,000 safety-critical jobs and the closure of ticket offices at a time when the Tube network is under growing pressure from customer demand and needs more staff and not less to ensure safe and efficient operation," said Bob Crow, RMT general secretary.

He said that staff not immediately affected by lay-offs were being "forced through the humiliating and degrading experience" of reapplying for their own jobs.

The RMT planned to co-ordinate its campaign against the ticket office closures with other unions, he added.

Manuel Cortes, TSSA general secretary, said the union had decided to ballot for industrial action because Boris Johnson, London's mayor, had refused to meet representatives to hear their "genuine fears for safety and security".

Phil Hufton, London Underground's chief operating officer, urged the unions to work with management to "shape the future of the Tube" and repeated his pledge that all stations would be staffed during Tube opening hours.

[The action is against] the axing of nearly 1,000 safety-critical jobs and the closure of ticket offices at a time when the Tube network is under growing pressure from customer demand and needs more staff and not less to ensure safe and efficient operation

- Bob Crow, RMT general secretary

TfL said in November it would deploy more staff on the stations to help passengers buy tickets from upgraded ticket machines.

"I want this to be a real consultation and I'm determined to listen to all views expressed. However, threatening industrial action will be seen by hard-working Londoners and businesses as totally unnecessary given all the commitments we have made," said Mr Hufton.

In total, 950 station staff will lose their jobs as a result of the ticket office closures but the move to a 24-hour weekend service will create 200 positions, leaving a net loss of 750. London Underground, which employs 18,000 staff, has said it is committed to achieving the job losses through voluntary redundancy.

The cutbacks, which will save £50m a year, reflect the dwindling importance of ticket offices to users of the network. Last year, less than 3 per cent of ticket sales were handled by ticket office staff, London Underground said, compared to almost 10 per cent a decade ago.

The fall reflects the popularity of the Oyster card and the increasing use of online sales to top up the travelcard. From next year, London Underground plans to roll out technology that will allow people to use wave-and-pay bank cards to pay directly for their journeys at ticket gates. The system is already in use on London's buses, although uptake has been low.

There are also plans to install 150 more ticket machines and to upgrade every terminal across the network to give them more functionality.

Visitor information centres will be opened in seven of the busiest stations, most frequently used by tourists, which will offer a range of services. These will include ticket sales for London's transport network, as well as for the national train network and tourist attractions.

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