Railway “colour bars”: Racism and resistance

At last week’s online Tubeworker meeting, held jointly with Off The Rails on 17 July, we learned about the history of “colour bars” on the railways.

After the Second World War, there was a labour shortage in Britain, and thousands of black workers from Britain's former colonies came to fill the jobs. London Transport set up a recruiting office in Barbados. Unfortunately, across the transport industry some white workers saw the black immigrants as a threat to their jobs and some even asked their unions to demand a bar, or a quota, on “coloured” workers. There were strikes against the employment of black and Asian workers on the buses in the West Midlands.

We watched a clip from a 1956 Panorama programme in which an NUR (National Union of Railwaymen, predecessor of RMT) rep explained that while they weren’t racist, they didn’t want coloured men working there because they were slow and prone to violence! Euston mainline station operated a bar on black workers into the 1960s, administered by a Staff Committee of NUR reps.

But the union nationally was firm in its anti-racism, and NUR General Secretaries went to speak with union members at work and persuaded them to aim their fire at the employers not at their fellow workers. In 1966, when Asquith Xavier (pictured) was refused a job at Euston solely and explicitly because of his colour, his NUR comrades at Marylebone took up the case and won an end to colour bars across the railway industry.

There are many important lessons for us today. While there are no longer colour bars in our industry (unlike then, it would be illegal now), black and ethnic minority workers are still over-represented in lower-paid jobs (particularly insecure, contracted-out work), and some Brexit-fuelled attitudes to Eastern European migrant workers echo those of the advocates of colour bars over fifty years ago.

We held a valuable discussion on racism past and present. Watch this space for details of further online Tubeworker meetings.

STOP PRESS:
DISCIPLINED FOR CHALLENGING RACISM?!
DEFEND SHERELLE CADOGAN!
SEE STORY ON BACK

Aslef members vote yes to action

Aslef members on LU have voted by a 95% majority in favour of industrial action, on a 70% turnout.

It’s a thumping result on a high turnout, that easily smashes the arbitrary thresholds of the Tories’ anti-union laws.

Aslef balloted over the demand that LU abide by all existing agreements - in other words, in defence of the status quo. Tubeworker commented previously that this demand was slightly lacking in ambition, and balloting for action to compel our bosses to abide by existing agreements implies we assume abiding by them might otherwise be optional! Nevertheless, Aslef’s method - of balloting preemptively, rather than waiting for the KPMG-led review into TfL finances commissioned by the Department for Transport to recommend cuts, and then balloting reactively - is absolutely the right one.

Although it seems unlikely Aslef will use the mandate to call action on any immediate timescale, their ballot result at least gives them the option to do so.

Other unions need to organise their own ballots as soon as possible, so that industrial action can be cross-combine.
KPMG REVIEW: OPEN THE BOOKS!

The review of TfL’s governance and finance led by accountancy firm KPMG, was due to make its initial report at the end of August.

The report’s terms of references made the intent very clear: cuts, and possible privatisation.

But TfL/LU bosses have now told unions that the contents of the review won’t be made public. Not only will they not be shared with unions, TfL bosses have said they don’t expect to see them either! KPMG will apparently report to the Department for Transport (DfT) only, to inform the DfT’s position on any further funding bailout once the current package runs out in October.

The future of our jobs, and the future of the transport service for London’s travelling public, is at stake. TfL/LU are public bodies. It’s not acceptable that only a handful of Tory ministers and some government bureaucrats will see the full scope of this review.

Although seeing its full contents won’t change our fundamental position - to oppose any and all cuts and attacks on terms and conditions - opening the books would allow for far greater scrutiny and response by the people the recommendations of the review will most directly affect.

As well as organising to resist cuts, our unions must also demand transparency.

THANKS?
The company wants to show us its appreciation for how we have kept London moving during the pandemic. Bless.

Management are running a survey asking us whether we would prefer a personal letter from the big cheeses, a thank-you video or a souvenir mag.

We even get to suggest an alternative sign of their appreciation. Tubeworker may well log on and suggest “a guarantee that you will not attack my job, conditions or pension”.

ACTION IN SERVICE CONTROL

In Victoria Line SC, where a bullying boss makes workers’ lives hell, workers will strike on 2 October, after a ballot delivered a unanimous strike vote.

RMT will also ballot members in the long-running fight to win decent conditions at the Hammersmith Service Control Centre (aka “HMP Hammersmith”), where workers are demanding conditions are brought up to scratch before any more workers are relocated there.

CONFLICT IN RMT

Tubeworker is an independent publication and not linked to any one union on the job.

We have readers, supporters, and contributors in all four LU unions. As such, we sometimes comment on issues inside individual unions.

In the spirit, we urge readers to read a recent article from our sister publication, Off the Rails, looking at a developing conflict inside RMT. The article argues for all allegations of bullying to be thoroughly and independently investigated, whilst reaffirming the principles of rank-and-file democracy rather than control by full-time officers.

Read the article at bit.ly/conflict-rmt

HANDS OFF OUR NEWSLETTERS

A trains manager took it upon themselves to remove a union newsletter from the depot booking-on point.

This was apparently because they took exception to an article about the concept of gaslighting in the context of racist discrimination.

A grievance has been submitted and the issue will be investigated. Whilst we don’t want to jump to conclusions, a newsletter possibly being taken down because it had an anti-racist article in it is pretty alarming.

Moreover, we can’t allow bosses to simply remove union literature they don’t like. The newsletter must go back up!

DEFEND SHERELLE

Sherelle Cadogan, an Instructor Operator and Aslef member, has been given a 12-month suspended dismissal for challenging racism!

A manager posted racist comments on social media, including disparaging remarks about Black Lives Matter.

Sherelle and others rightly, challenged this. The manager was reported for their comments, but Sherelle found herself disciplined as well in a counter-complaint from the manager!

This is an extremely worrying precedent. We could all face disciplinary action for standing up to racism.

Sign and share the petition to support Sherelle:
change.org/p/support-sherelle

INSPECTION DEFLECTION

Planned General inspections (PGIs) on stations are a management responsibility.

A CSS might accompany a CSM - if they want to - but managers certainly can’t get CSSs to do the inspection for them.

We understand that this reminder might be timely and useful for stations at the north end of the Victoria line.

What is Tubeworker?

Tubeworker is a rank-and-file socialist bulletin, published at least monthly, written by Tube workers, for Tube workers. It is published by the socialist group Workers’ Liberty, but is produced in editorial meetings open to all workers. Supporters from outside London Underground can help with public distribution.

Email us at tubeworker@workersliberty.org

TAXI FOR GETT!

Staff were left stranded on 14 September when taxi provider Gett’s systems went down.

After a dead late the last thing you need is to not know whether your taxi is coming. Tubeworker hopes those affected insisted on coming in the same length of time late as they got home the night before.

This is the second time in three months that Gett’s systems have failed.

It might be more effective to bring the staff taxi service in-house: employ the cabbies directly and take responsibility for those glitchy “systems”.

CASHLESS

LU has announced its intention to extend cashless ticketing to the whole network.

This may be needed as a temporary infection control measure, but making it permanent would punish poorer passengers, lead to more grief for staff, and potentially risk jobs, as LU would need fewer CSAs for POM servicing. This must be opposed.

subscribe!

Want to get every issue of Tubeworker (published at least monthly)? Send us your address along with a tenner (cheques payable to WL Bulletins)

Got a story for Tubeworker? We welcome reports and comments from all Tube workers.

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