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Tangled Up In Metronet

ByUnterschreber

The current tube strike in London demands guarantees that the insolvent Private Public Partnership (PPP) Metronet will not seek to cover its losses at the expense of labour. Unterschreber unravels the matrix of blame

So many things Mute has been talking about over the last few months are writ large in the Metronet insolvency and strike that however provisional and awkward it is worth commenting on in 'real time'.

Once again, what Rob Ray is talking about in the article 'The 3 P's - PFI, Private Equity, and Pensions' [<http://www.metamute.org/en/The-3-Ps>] is played out on the tabloid front pages. Some guy from the London Chamber of Commerce says: 'no-one gets copper-bottomed guarantees any more', but 'administration'/bankruptcy 'protection' is precisely the last-ditch means of ensuring that claims of capital (in descending hierarchy of sub-categories, with financial debt at the top) are 'guaranteed' at the expense of those of labour.

Given that the Metronet bankruptcy has universally been blamed on the consortium itself (rather than 'antiquated industrial relations' or something, as in cases like BAA), the basic premise that government, mayoralty, business lobbies etc start from is revealed clearly by their response to the strike: ALL contestation of the aforementioned hierarchy of claims, i.e. of the naturalness of the principle that labour should pay capital's debts, is officially 'antisocial', 'selfish', 'dinosaur-anachronism', etc.

In spite of the 'outrage' announced on behalf of 'the public', people who depend on working for a living may, if they get a moment's leeway to think about it, find it hard to forget:

(1.) that the stakes are a few days inconvenience on their 'side' versus the threat of permanent ruin for the redundant and pensionless. The Evening Standard found someone to bleat, "how dare they, when they get a good wage!"; some wage earners will hopefully notice that this is exactly the point: i.e. the difference between a future with a good wage and a life of 'retrained' destitution is more drastic than that between a pleasant and an unpleasant week's commuting.

(2.) therefore some worker-commuters will hopefully notice that their own self-interest goes a lot further than transport convenience. If the 'labour pays for capital's bankruptcy' principle prevails, it will be their lives that will be ruined next. And prevail it certainly will unless confronted by the intransigent, 'inconvenient' force that transport workers have been among the few to use in Britain in recent years.

Perhaps this common interest between workers striking 'defensively' now and those liable to end up in the same position soon could be emphasised, and the conflict made to seem less 'defensive', if the demand were widely circulated (i.e. by strikers and working tube users) that the burden of disruption must not be borne by tube-using workers but by their employers: i.e. bosses should be prevented from demanding that workers 'find' a way to arrive and leave at the usual time and penalizing those who don't. Given labour's relatively weak powers of informal counter-coercion here and now, this could presumably only be done by mass semi-absenteeism, by tube-dependent and other workers alike. (If this doesn't happen, it only goes to show once more that 'copper bottom' guarantees do exist on one side.)

It's interesting in a frightening way that administrator Ernst & Young, Livingstone and Brown and most media (endorsed by Unite and the white-collar-professional union) expect to be able to pass off as generous rather than insulting the promise that jobs and pensions will be untouched DURING receivership, but not afterwards when the new franchise-owner's actions will be regarded as unrelated to what went before.

This seems to confirm that one of the shrewdest POLITICAL elements of PPP/PFI is the fragmentation of managerial power and responsibility, so that each layer of capital appears only administer to conditions which are objectively given elsewhere. Thus, for example, Livingstone can 'oppose' PPP in public debate then go on to administer it, and makes promises to workers as far as his powers go, then vilifies those who resist when attacked by the next level of the same system. By the same logic, Metronet (rather than the policy it was set up to take advantage of) supposedly 'creates' the financial 'black hole', then withdraws in 'disgrace'. Its shareholders (or rather their insurers and reinsurers) pay what their limited liability requires them to, then after receivership ends the ex-consortium officially has nothing more to do with the ongoing financial situation. The damage done becomes the 'objective' conditions taken on by the new contractor, which passes the burden on, according to the usual rules, to labour, subcontractors, subcontractors' labour and consumers, with the latter set up to blame the 'selfishness' of (other people's) labour.

The way PPP/PFI dislocates economic causality, making things-as-they-are appear inevitable at every point, was also evident in the regime imposed on tube cleaners (many of whom are illegalized migrants) by Metronet subcontractors, who of course point out that their 'hands are tied', as are those of Metronet by London Underground, LU by TFL, TFL by the Mayor, the Son by the Father by the Holy Spirit etc etc.