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More misery for London commuters [1]

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The RMT and TSSA ? the underground's biggest trade unions ? have threatened [3] to ballot their workers for strike action tomorrow, if Transport for London (TfL) does not meet their demands (which is basically impossible, given the time constraints).

The unions object to ticket office closures and the employment of non-union, agency, security or sub-contractor staff on the tube network. That is not surprising. They know that private-sector workers could do a much better job, at a much lower price. Frankly, they could hardly fail to do so. Unfortunately, the fact that TfL is a public-sector monopoly makes it easy to hold them to ransom and commuters suffer as a result.

Using the tube is a nightmare. According to statistics obtained [4] under the Freedom of Information Act, the average commuter on the Metropolitan Line wasted three days, 10 hours and 25 minutes in 2006 due to delays. I hate to think what the figure would be on my (notoriously unreliable) branch of the district line.

These problems are not insurmountable: the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) provides a good model for the future. First of all, it is computerized and driverless. That blunts the power of the unions but also makes it more reliable, since trains can run a set distance from one another, arriving and departing at set times, without reliance on an antiquated human-signalling system.

Secondly, the DLR is operated and maintained by a private franchise, which means better management and greater efficiency. Our report *Underground Revolution* advocated [5] a similar structure for the rest of the network, which would be split into four vertically integrated businesses (Metropolitan, District, Circle, Hammersmith & City lines; Jubilee and Bakerloo lines; Piccadilly and Central lines; Northern and Victoria lines). Splitting the tube up would promote competition in ideas on innovation, marketing and efficiency, as well as weakening the hand of the unions. Vertical integration would encourage investment in infrastructure and capacity building.

In short, no other policy would make such a difference to Londoners' quality of life.

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