

Squeeze and Wiggle: Transport Chaos in London Underground. Strike by Station Workers

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It has the air of being a well minted yet distinctly first world problem: inconvenienced commuters in one of the world's first true megalopolises, gnashing their teeth as they are pushed and grounded together during the rush hour. All because of a strike by station workers on the London Underground, which supplies the arterial blood for commuter traffic in the city on a daily basis.

The strike, instigated by the Rail Maritime and Transport union and Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, had been calculated to cause maximum inconvenience. Their grounds remain traditional: a persistent dislike for the closing of ticket offices, and the reduction of staff numbers at stations.

London, at the best of times, reeks of greying decay and creaky transport arrangements. The review by TravelWatch into the workings of the London Underground added succour to that proposition. It identified problems with the continuing mania with ticket vending machines, limited access for people with disabilities and the general structural layout of stations.[1] Guidance and information to passengers was also considered poor.

All it takes is one disruption to breed many; one freakish act of nature to stall several parts of an all-ready ill functioning public transport system. Despite such events, there is a striking note of business as usual. Crankiness, while evident at points, is carefully bottled. London will muddle through.

Today, the crowds and queues gathering on the overland lines heading into the central part of the city gave it an ever greater air of slumming, edging ever to chaos. Clapham Junction featured crowds of such magnitude as to prompt announcements for evacuation. This did not stop others still braving the throngs, mechanically programmed, as ever, to make work on time.

Platforms on stops along the Bedford and Luton line heaved with agitation and lengthy, snaking queues. At the point where the train's doors would open, people had planted themselves with grim determination, waiting to push in others back into the train at a moment's notice.

Deodorised (and some not so) bodies rubbed together; there is friction and the odd nervous glare, highly awkward placing of body parts between spaces. Travelling in London is, in the main, a hermetic experience, premised on getting to the point of alighting with little fuss, and preferably little conversation. The hermits were finding themselves looking at each other, though many preferred the escapist route of their phones.

In such situations, the little authoritarian voice is bound to make a showing. One calls out

that we are collectively in this together, and we all had to muck in to make the journey more bearable. “Can you wiggle a bit down the carriage?,” came the headmistress-liked tone from an individual who might well be an attendant, or simply an officious passenger.

“F***k off!” snarls a commuter in the back of the carriage. “Don’t worry about him,” replies the officious headmistress with indifference. Her purpose was set for the glory of encouragement. “He is just being selfish. Come on everybody, pull yourselves together and don’t be selfish at the start of the week!”

The ride into St. Pancras becomes oppressive, only relenting at the City Thameslink stop, but the famous British temper in the face of intervening inconvenience, and in some cases existential threat, holds. There is nothing to be done, and people do their best to wiggle and move in the fiercely occupied spaces, adjusting their work bags, crushing the odd toe or finding an errant hand on a less than willing breast. Again, the bottling of emotion is evident, and the mind begins to reflect on hidden neuroses, concealed conditions, and the mysterious inner anger that always seems mediated.

Even the other Europeans obviously going in for work in the city are making a decent, sombre fist of it, knowing that things could always be worse, even if the London system can be, at times, atrocious relative to continental counterparts.

There is much to be entertained by – the fanatical desire to keep The City’s financial fires burning, the robotic sense of purpose that defies self-examination. For others, the fuss is simply too much. It was always going to be a bit too rich for those with a cardiovascular condition, or any other range of conditions which make proximity to fellow humans a challenge. The journey to St. Pancras stalls with some excitement, with the driver informing everybody, apologetically, that some one had taken ill and was being tended to on the platform. The curious crane locked necks, though the fuss proved to be minimal.

There are also tips available for those who had not thought how to navigate the city on foot. Taking the underground tends to be automatic position of London commuter, even between short distances. “Stuck during the tube strike?” went the *IB Times UK*. “Here’s how long it takes to walk between stations.”

Those seeking to use such transport services as Uber and Addison Lee were coming up with little. Transport for London announced a remedy of 150 extra buses, interesting commuters with a few vintage models. All in all, it was evident that the city, on this Monday, was paralysed. Focus, then, turned on the motivations behind the strike.

The usual vox pops approach by the media suggested a rag bag of opinions. The general theme was that such a strike was “annoying” and did little to advance the broader union cause, though such a figure as one Dr. Simon Quantrill would tell *The Guardian* that he “did not agree with cutting work staff at the stations... people do not want to go on strike. They don’t get paid.”

London’s Mayor Sadiq Khan found himself in the embarrassing situation of having an election pledge broken. Under his stewardship, he promised that the city would see no more strikes. He must have believed it himself, given the TSSA union’s donation of a decent £15,000 to his mayoral campaign.

Khan, along with his predecessors, has tended to believe that the human factor needs to

suffer in the face of technological change. A leaner employment force armed to the teeth with dispensing machines, where human agents are minimal and distant, is deemed better than a larger, better informed LU force that provides a broader range of services. And so the battle continues.

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[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-38181908>

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