

THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1926

By Antony Badsey-Ellis

In the 1920s labour disputes were common in Britain. The most significant of these was the General Strike, which lasted for nine days from midnight on 3/4 May 1926, and started with the coal miners walking out after the threat of wage reductions. A government subsidy for the coal mining industry was due to finish at the end of May, and negotiations to resolve what should happen thereafter had failed.

The Trades Union Congress called out other industries in support of the miners¹, and to a large extent brought the country to a halt. This article does not intend to look at anything other than the effects of the strike upon the services of the Underground lines and the Metropolitan Railway.

The latter company took preparatory action on **Sunday 2 May**. A letter was sent to their retired operating staff asking if they would be able to return to work if required. The Metropolitan Railway General Manager, Robert Selbie, wrote to all current staff urging them to stay at work, not break their contracts, and not inconvenience many thousands of commuters.

A notice was issued to Underground Group staff on **Monday 3 May** from the office of the Chairman, Lord Ashfield, asking the staff to consider that their loyalty to the public and the nation should override their loyalty to the miners. He continued, "In this crisis each man must decide for himself but we hope that we can rely upon the staff remaining at work". Unfortunately this was not the case, and 39,000 staff from the railways, buses, tramways, and related services walked out with effect from midnight at the end of the day. Of particular concern were the power station workers, and the Metropolitan Railway immediately started to recruit volunteers. By the end of the day this was being highly successful, to the extent that just 12 additional men were needed, and these were naval ratings. The volunteers were paid at the same rate as the men that they replaced.

Careful planning had been undertaken by the Met. They had determined which clerical staff had train driving experience, and seconded their drawing office staff to assist with train maintenance. The company was informed by the Union shop stewards that the night maintenance staff would remain until the end of their shift at 07.30, and to that end it was decided to use them to ready as many trains as possible for service. The information was a lie though, and not one of the shift arrived for duty. The Night Foreman spent the entire night singlehandedly inspecting as many trains as he could to ensure that they were suitable to enter service.

On **Tuesday 4 May** the Underground services were almost non-existent, with just 33 station staff and 6 guards turning up for work. The Underground Group issued a public appeal for volunteers (as well as asking their administrative staff if they could help). This had been done before during a strike in 1919 and was very successful. The BBC broadcast the appeal, and an "overwhelming response" was received. Volunteers to replace workers at the Lots Road and Wood Lane power stations started work immediately, assisted by more naval ratings. A training programme was immediately started for motormen, gatemen, liftmen, and engineers, with twelve training centres established. By 18.00 sufficient current was being generated to allow a shuttle service to be operated on the Central London Railway between Liverpool Street and Wood Lane, with a flat fare of 3d being charged. This was set to deter people from travelling short distances, as well as to simplify the booking procedure for the volunteer staff helping in the ticket offices.

The Metropolitan Railway was more successful with its services. All of the foremen available at Neasden (bar two) were engaged in manual labour, readying trains for service. By first light it was apparent that they had more trains fit to run than were needed. However, there were concerns that the trains might suffer at the hands of the volunteer staff, and so the surplus was welcomed.

The first train left for Harrow (its station of origin is unclear) at 06.55, with two more leaving Baker Street for Harrow and Liverpool Street at 07.00. The first Up train from Harrow departed at 07.13. Four more Inner Circle trains entered service during the course of the morning, running between South Kensington and Aldgate. At 11.50 a solitary train began a shuttle service between Hammersmith and Paddington (Bishop's Road), which it continued for the rest of the day. Another

¹ This is known as 'secondary action', and was made illegal in 1927 as a result of the strike. It was made legal again in 1946, and most recently fully outlawed in the 1990 Employment Act.

solitary working was the only steam train operated that day, from Wembley Park. It departed at 17.00, and arrived at Aylesbury at 18.21. At 18.50 it returned to Wembley.

Services operated every 15 minutes between Baker Street and Harrow from noon, and every 20 minutes on the northern half of the Inner Circle. Between 16.00 and 21.00 trains ran every hour from Baker Street to Uxbridge and Rickmansworth. The last working was at 22.15, from Baker Street to Harrow. By this time 235 trips had been run. The volunteers were not being used so much for driving trains as for undertaking simple maintenance tasks at Neasden, such as replacing brake blocks and oiling.

Some 30% of its staff concerned with power generation and distribution were working, and sleeping and eating facilities were provided at Neasden power station and the electricity substations so that they would not be affected by the transport difficulties. Food had been stockpiled in advance by the company. The Chief Electrical Engineer's Department issued their own news sheet, *The Neasden Herald*, to keep the men up to date with events, both on the railway and elsewhere.

Because the volunteers were not skilled to the same level as the men that they replaced an Ambulance Officer was arranged to be on duty at all times at Neasden power station. Special constables were also present, and were also on duty at each substation. They inspected the permits issued to all staff to ensure that security was maintained at the sites.

The next day, **Wednesday 5 May**, a six-minute service continued to be operated by eight trains on the CLR, with this increasing to every four minutes later on. This operated between 08.00 and 20.00, and called at Shepherd's Bush, Lancaster Gate, Oxford Circus, Tottenham Court Road, and Bank. Queen's Road station opened from 16.30, and around the same time the service increased to every four minutes.

The Evening News reported that the District and Piccadilly lines 'may open tonight or tomorrow'. In the event only the District resumed services, starting from 17.00 and running between Hammersmith and Mansion House, and calling at Earl's Court, Victoria, St. James's Park, and Charing Cross. These services stopped for the day at 20.00. On the Metropolitan Railway around 15 trains were now in operation, and *The Times* informed its readers (via its only typewritten edition of the strike) that "a good service" would be operating from 06.40 on all parts of the MR except the Moorgate to Finsbury Park section, on which only Old Street station was open. Some 379 trains operated, and the service intervals were as follows:

Service	Interval	First Train	Last Train back
Harrow – Baker Street	15	06.40	22.15
South Kensington – Liverpool Street	15	07.55	unknown
Finsbury Park – Moorgate	20	unknown	19.40
Hammersmith – Paddington	30	unknown	21.00
Uxbridge – Baker Street	60	08.20	21.00
Rickmansworth – Baker Street	60	08.35	21.15

The service interval on the Finsbury Park to Moorgate service increased to 30 minutes by 13.00. In addition to these services four trains were also operated in each direction between Baker Street and Aylesbury. The Up trains left at 09.30, 13.30, 15.30 and 18.40, the Down trains at 07.00, 11.15, 12.45, and 16.15.

The District Railway's service on **Thursday 6 May** was similar to that of the day before, but started at 09.00. The Hampstead Tube opened at midday (but not the Highgate branch), with an eight-minute service calling at Golders Green, Belsize Park, Tottenham Court Road, Leicester Square, and Strand. The Bakerloo Line opened by 13.00, and the City line (i.e. the C&SLR) by the evening. The CLR service increased still further, with one train every three minutes, and the remaining parts of the line reopened at 15.00, together with Blackfriars, Temple, Westminster, and Sloane Square stations on the District.

All LER services terminated at 20.00. It was announced that 400 trainmen were available, with 250 per day being trained. If the training was similar to that given during the strike of 1919 (in which volunteers were also used) then it involved a day for being acquainted with how to drive a train, a day-and-a-half of route training on a particular line, and a final afternoon on solving train defects. The volunteers were then allowed out on their own – a far cry from the detailed training courses run today! By the end of the day some 3,000 volunteers had enrolled, and it was not possible to accommodate

any more on the training courses. The great majority of volunteers were provided with food and sleeping accommodation at the company depôts.

The Metropolitan Railway services continued to increase their services, with 435 trains operating, and bulletins claimed that a “full service” was running. Of peripheral Underground interest, the LNER restored its services to Epping, with some even running through to Ongar on **Friday 7 May**. The following services were operated on the Underground railways:

Line	Service	Interval
Bakerloo	Paddington – Lambeth North, calling at main stations	Unknown
Central London	Liverpool Street – Wood Lane	5 minutes
	Wood Lane – Ealing Broadway	15 minutes
District	Hammersmith – Mansion House	7½ minutes
	Earl’s Court – Putney Bridge	7½ minutes
Hampstead	Golders Green – Strand	8 minutes
Piccadilly	Due to open in the evening	
Waterloo & City	Waterloo – City	Unknown. Trains operated 08.00 – 11.00, and 15.30 – 18.30

The Daily Mail reported that since the start of the strike the Metropolitan Railway had carried over 500,000 passengers. The service of the previous day was strengthened to 488 trains, with the table below showing the services operated:

Service	Interval	First Train	Last Train
Baker Street – Harrow	15	07.00	22.30
Harrow – Baker Street	15	06.40	22.35
Baker Street – Uxbridge	60	07.15	21.00
Uxbridge – Baker Street	60	08.20	22.00
Baker Street – Rickmansworth	60	07.15	21.15
Rickmansworth – Baker Street	60	08.15	22.15
Aldgate – South Kensington	10	07.50	21.00
South Kensington – Aldgate	10	08.00	21.00
Paddington – Hammersmith	15	unknown	unknown
Hammersmith – Paddington	15	unknown	unknown
Moorgate – Finsbury Park	20	08.27	19.47
Finsbury Park – Moorgate	20	08.30	19.30

The steam services north of Rickmansworth were timed as follows:

Service	Departure Times
Baker Street – Aylesbury	07.00, 10.15, 12.45, 16.15
Aylesbury – Baker Street	09.30, 13.30, 15.30, 18.40

Lord Ashfield issued a statement on **Saturday 8 May** reporting that “our trains are now running up to 50 per cent of the pre-strike rate, and are improving every day. By next week we will probably be running a 100 per cent service”. He also wrote to the volunteers, stating that “We are proud of you, just as you are of yourselves. Be assured of our complete support in the great work you are performing in this crisis in the history of our beloved country”. That day the CLR ran a 5-minute service, and the City line operated between Bank and Clapham Common. A total of 75 (out of 124) Underground stations were open, and the branches from Acton Town to Hounslow and Camden Town to Highgate reopened.

The Metropolitan provided additional services on the north side of the Inner Circle so that they continued until 21.20 – the Hammersmith to Paddington services were slightly reduced though, to a 20-minute interval. An extra train was also provided from Finsbury Park to Moorgate at 19.50 for this day only. In total the Met. ran 495 trains.

The Waterloo & City Railway also increased its services, which ran from 08.00 until 10.30, then 11.30 until 14.00, and finally from 15.30 until 18.30.

Some propaganda ensued, with varying claims emanating from *The British Gazette* (published by the Government and fiercely anti-strike) and *The British Worker* (published by the TUC, and pro-strike). The latter noted on **Sunday 9 May** that Victoria Underground station did not have a 16-minute service, as reported, but actually a 40-minute service, with alternate westbound trains running to Acton and Putney. The official bulletins record that the Underground group only operated trains between the hours of 12 noon and 20.00.

As expected a much reduced service operated on the Sunday by the MR, as described in the table below. No trains operated on the Inner Circle, H&CR, or GN&C section.

Service	Interval	First Train	Last Train
Baker Street – Harrow	30	09.00	19.00
Harrow – Baker Street	30	09.20	19.20
Baker Street – Uxbridge	60	09.00	18.00
Uxbridge – Baker Street	60	10.00	19.00
Baker Street – Rickmansworth	60	09.30	18.30
Rickmansworth – Baker Street	60	10.30	18.30

Two departures from Aylesbury to Baker Street were made at 12.55 and 17.55, with the opposite workings at 09.30 and 15.00.

The Metropolitan Railway ran a strong service of 565 trips on **Monday 10 May**. Services to Watford and Chesham resumed, and some extra trains were run. The changes from those listed for Friday are given in the following tables:

Service	Interval	First Train	Last Train
Baker Street – Uxbridge	30	07.00	21.00
Uxbridge – Baker Street	30	08.00	22.00
Baker Street – Watford	60	07.45	20.45
Watford – Baker Street	60	08.45	21.45
Aldgate – South Kensington	10	08.20	21.30
South Kensington – Aldgate	10	07.40	21.00
Paddington – Hammersmith	20	07.00	21.40
Hammersmith – Paddington	20	07.20	22.00

Service	Departure Times
Baker Street – Chesham	07.00, 10.15, 12.45, 16.15
Chesham – Baker Street	09.45, 13.45, 15.45, 18.56

Additional trains were operated from Harrow to Aylesbury at 06.37, and from Aylesbury to Baker Street departing at 08.30. One further train ran a single shuttle from Chesham to Chalfont & Latimer at 07.15, timed to connect with the 08.15 train to Aylesbury.

The Underground group railways were now running as shown below, with a total of 800 trains journeys operated:

Line	Service	Interval
Bakerloo	Queen's Park – Lambeth North	5 minutes
Central London	Wood Lane – Liverpool Street	5 minutes
City	Euston – Clapham Common	8-10 minutes
District	Ealing Broadway – Mansion House	7½ minutes
	Earl's Court – Putney Bridge	10 minutes
	Earl's Court – Hounslow	20 minutes
Hampstead	Golders Green – Strand	8-10 minutes
	Golders Green – Edgware	15 minutes
	Camden Town – Highgate	12 minutes
Piccadilly	Finsbury Park – Hammersmith	8-10 minutes

The following stations are known to have been open:

Line	Stations
Bakerloo	Lambeth North, Waterloo, Charing Cross, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus, Oxford Circus, Baker Street, Paddington, Queen's Park.
Central	Wood Lane, Shepherd's Bush, Queen's Road, Lancaster Gate, Oxford Circus, Tottenham Court Road, Bank, Liverpool Street.
City District	Euston, Moorgate, Bank, London Bridge, Stockwell, Clapham Common. Mansion House, Blackfriars, Temple, Charing Cross, Westminster, St. James's Park, Victoria, Sloane Square, Earl's Court, West Kensington, Hammersmith, Acton Town, Ealing Broadway, Parsons Green, Putney Bridge, Northfields, Hounslow.
Hampstead	Edgware, Hendon Central, Golders Green, Belsize Park, Camden Town, Highgate, Tottenham Court Road, Leicester Square, Strand.
Piccadilly	Finsbury Park, Holborn, Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus, Hyde Park Corner, Knightsbridge, Earl's Court, Hammersmith.

The details for other lines and stations are unfortunately not known at present.

The following day, **Tuesday 11 May**, 80 stations were open, and services were operating on all sections of the tubes except Holborn – Aldwych, and Strand – Charing Cross. Dover Street and Down Street reopened on the Piccadilly Line, and the CLR increased its service to one train every four minutes. The Hampstead Line service was also strengthened. The minimum fare remained 3d however, to deter short-distance travellers from using the trains, and staff were instructed to place “Not Working” signs on ticket machines for other denominations. Outside the rush hours the tubes were described as being not particularly crowded.

Services on the Metropolitan showed a slight increase again, with an extra 300 train-miles being run. *The Times* noted that the MR and MDR between them had operated the following numbers of trains:

- 4 May: 243
- 5 May: 387
- 6 May: 465
- 7 May: 522
- 8 May: 544

An unfortunate incident occurred on **Wednesday 12 May**, which was the last day of the strike. A volunteer motorman called James Vanden Bergh, an undergraduate at Cambridge, was found in the cab of his CLR train with head injuries. He had no memory of the attack, and police were treating it as foul play. Although the unions called for strikers to act peacefully at all times there were a number of violent elements involved. Hitherto they had confined their activities in the transport field to wrecking buses and trams (smashing engines and motors, and burning vehicles), and this was the first reported violence on the tubes.

On a positive note, more stations opened, bringing the total to around 90. The strike was officially over at 12.20. By this time there were 5,000 volunteers helping on the Underground railways (including the Met.). A three-minute service was running on the CLR, six-minute services on the District, Bakerloo, and Hampstead lines, and an eight-minute service on the City line. The sections of the Hampstead line between Golders Green and Edgware, and Camden Town and Highgate operated with a 15-minute service. The press reported that Osterley, Hampstead, Euston (Hampstead Line), Warren Street, Elephant & Castle, Oval, and King's Cross (Met.) all reopened – an LER internal memo notes them as being South Kensington (District), Warren Street, Elephant & Castle, Oval, King's Cross (Piccadilly and City), Regent's Park, and Kilburn Park. The Metropolitan Railway announced that services to Aldgate from the “extension line” would resume the next day.

An LER Traffic Notice recorded that the Westinghouse Brake Company had also offered to help, by inviting (from 12 May) groups of volunteers to visit its training school. One group of up to twelve was to be permitted each day (except weekends). However, it is likely that only one group would have attended.

The Times noted that 80% of the full service was in operation by the afternoon of **Thursday 13 May**. The LER had requested all volunteers to keep helping out until the end of the strike was properly confirmed. Charing Cross station reopened on the Hampstead Line, and South Kensington on the Piccadilly. The District extended its services eastwards from Mansion House to Mark Lane and

Whitechapel, with trains running every 15 minutes. Many of the trains were still crewed by volunteers.

The South Kensington to Aldgate services on the Metropolitan Railway were replaced by trains from South Kensington to Baker Street – these connected with the City trains running from Metro-Land. Four additional return trips were operated on the Chesham branch, making nine in total, and the Hammersmith to Paddington trains now ran every 15 minutes.

The request for volunteers to remain with the Company was repeated on **Friday 14 May**, in the Traffic Notice. The same document noted that it was not possible to renew season tickets, and that passengers with such tickets that had expired should be informed that a concession would be made in due course, once normal conditions had resumed. Trains were now operating on all tube lines from end to end, the service intervals being the same as the previous day.

The regular staff resumed their roles on the morning of **Saturday 15 May**. Volunteers were paid monies owed to them by that evening, with a bonus of one days' pay if they had worked up to five days, and two days' pay for longer periods.

It was stated that some 9,610 volunteers helped the Underground Group run its services on the trains, buses and trams. Interestingly 7,515 (78%) were people normally employed but who made themselves available, 1,797 (19%) were students or of independent means, and only 298 (3%) were unemployed. On the Metropolitan Railway 819 (out of 5-6,000 who applied) were employed, many of whom were retirees. The next year, at the Underground shareholders' meeting, Lord Ashfield noted that the Underground had carried 16 million passengers during the strike, instead of the 60 million that would normally have been carried in the same period.

The resumption of full services took a few days. Trains were in the wrong places, maintenance needed attending to, and it could not be achieved overnight. **Sunday 16 May** again saw emergency timetables in use on the MR, but unlike the previous Sunday trains were operated between Hammersmith and Aldgate every 10 minutes. It took until **Monday 17 May** before the Underground was back to normal – the Metropolitan services between Finsbury Park and Moorgate, and from Hammersmith to Aldgate were also running normally. The East London line also reopened. The rest of the Metropolitan services resumed fully on **Tuesday 18 May**. On that the Metropolitan Railway Board decided that the staff who had remained loyal throughout the strike should receive double pay for the period. Letters were distributed to the relevant staff on 1 June.

On **Wednesday 19 May** Lord Ashfield issued a statement of his thanks to the many volunteers who had stepped in to keep the Underground running. He wrote:

"I desire to thank the volunteers for their able and diligent service in carrying on London traffic for the last 11 days, and so enabling the nation to maintain its integrity and authority. I trust that we part with good will and satisfaction on both sides. There is certainly no doubt that we on our part are more than satisfied. We shall never forget our association with you during a great national emergency and I hope that you may carry with you a pleasant recollection of the time you spent with us."

Strikers were taken back on only in the numbers necessary to perform the work – many services were still reduced. If too many people reapplied then they were taken on in order of seniority. By being taken back on the strikers accepted that the companies could still take legal action against them and/or their unions. Only those who had engaged in violence, riot, or sabotage were not reinstated.

York Road and Brompton Road stations had remained closed at the end of the strike. They were not heavily used, and since 1909 and 1910 respectively many trains non-stopped them. The Underground group must have seen this as a good opportunity to close the stations for good, as had happened two years previously with South Kentish Town station on the Hampstead Line. But it was not to be. Questions were asked in the House of Commons, and on 4 October both reopened to the public. They remained closed on Sundays, and the rest of the week the doors were shut at 23.00. Opening times were also later than usual: 06.00 at York Road and 07.45 at Brompton Road.

This article has been based on reports in *The Evening News*, *The Evening Standard*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express*, and *The Daily Chronicle*, all of which continue to publish in abbreviated (and sometimes typewritten) forms during the dispute. The Roneo Bulletins issued by the BBC at regular intervals throughout the day have been of particular help – the copies sent to Frank Pick and now held by Transport for London in their archive were used. The London

Metropolitan Archives have a rich vein of information from the Metropolitan Railway, including detailed reports written by the Chief Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

Other information has come from *The British Worker*, *The British Gazette*, Emergency Strike Bulletins, and News Bulletins, which were issued by various groups throughout the strike. The strike diary published in *The Railway Gazette* for 7 and 14 May has also been of use. Given the limited printing facilities, and sometimes muddled information presented, it is not always entirely clear what was happening on the railways: the above account is the best that can be pieced together from the available evidence. Some of the statistics come from *A History of London Transport Volume Two* (Baker & Robbins), and additional information has come from *The Underground Story* (Day & Reed, 9th edition). My thanks go to the various archives (notably those of Transport for London, the London Metropolitan Archives, and the Guildhall Library) for the assistance given in the compilation of this article.

Id Stratford City opened on 13 September, an enhanced DLR service was provided for it for the first week. Monday to Friday services operated as follows:

10.00 to 16.00	5 mins	Woolwich Arsenal – Stratford International.
	10 mins	Bank – Beckton (replacing the usual Bank – Woolwich Arsenal service).
19.30 to 21.00	10 mins	Additional Woolwich Arsenal – Stratford International service, complementing Beckton – Stratford International service

On Saturday and Sunday 17/18 September, services changes were –

All Day	6 mins	Stratford – Lewisham (service extended from Canary Wharf).
12.00 to 19.00	10 mins	Additional Woolwich Arsenal – Stratford International service, complementing Beckton – Stratford International service.

In addition, some trains were formed of three vehicles.

A further package of improvements is planned for stations along the eastern route, from Poplar to Beckton and Poplar to Woolwich, later on this year. They will deliver better lighting, new seating and enhanced information displays for passengers.

Although as appearing to be as good as 'complete', there are further extensions to the Docklands Light Railway in the planning stage – see *Underground News* No.595, July 2011, pages 387-388.