

Voices

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Tales abound of people's 'epic bravery' in the face of the Tube strikes. But these can't disguise widespread support for the union's action



Isn't it marvellous to preserve quaint English traditions, like going mental about a transport strike?

Reports on the London Underground dispute have been faithful to the custom, with stories such as: "One brave accountant beat the strike by rowing a kayak through the sewers. Speaking from his office, he said: 'I've got the plague now, so I have to spend the next 20 years in isolation, but it's worth it not to let Bob Crow bully me into having a day off.'"

Local radio stations track down plucky commuters for accounts such as: "I had some important sales figures to add up, and didn't want to leave them until Friday, so I broke into the RAF base in Northolt and stole a Lancaster bomber to beat the strike."

"Luckily my route took me over an RMT picket line so I strafed the militants on the way and still got to the office by 8.55."

One typical headline said: "Tube strike misery as thousands battle to get home." Battle? Did the RMT line up at Paddington with spears, with Bob Crow on horseback, yelling: "Our members what have been given no choice must go once more unto the breach, brothers and sisters."

The word "misery" was repeated several times in the article, so that anyone not familiar with the tradition must assume that people in the queue for a bus were eating each other, and that there should be an even more harrowing sequel to *12 Years a Slave* called *20 Minutes' Walk to Charing Cross*.

But this time one part of the tradition has been altered, because in a poll of Londoners,

Perhaps the sequel to '12 Years a Slave' should be called '20 Minutes' Walk to Charing Cross'

65 per cent thought the strike was justified. One possible reason for this may be that the strike is against the closure of ticket offices, and dismissal of most of the staff.

Boris Johnson and his supporters say these closures will "modernise" the network, which makes sense, because the best way to modernise or freshen anything up is to shut it down.

This is why, if a top designer came to your house, they'd squeal: "Oh how ghastly, it's open and there are people here, how dated. We must modernise it by sending everyone away and putting a board and padlock over the door, because shut is the new open."

When Transport for London executives wander round a derelict industrial estate, full of sheds with smashed windows obscured by barbed wire and weeds, they must think: "This is SO modern, EVERYTHING'S shut. You can smell the 22nd century."

Boris Johnson says the new system will be an improvement for passengers, because it will "shift staff from behind the windows to where they can be seen". But the plans are to cut 950 ticket office staff, and put only 200 extra staff round the stations. So when he says he's going to put them "where they can be seen", maybe he means on the next series of *Benefits Street*.



One of the few Underground trains to run yesterday: how many of these people would welcome the closure of ticket offices? EPA

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To clear this up, asked if the cuts would mean that some stations are run by a single member of staff, a Transport for London spokesman replied: "More staff will take a greater level of ownership at a local level."

This must mean two things. First they're hoping that the poor sod left to run an entire station on their own – selling tickets, sweeping up, blowing whistles, and yelling "mind the gap" – accepts this on the debatable grounds that they now own the station. And second, Transport for London's press office is staffed by one of these Argentinian football managers who give incomprehensible interviews after a game. If they're asked about negotiations with the union they'll say: "Many will hope carriages is longer for when Jubilee is northbound southbound take one train at a time at a local level."

It must be doubtful whether the service

will improve as a result of these closures. Of all the complaints you hear about the Underground, one that crops up very little is: "I wish there weren't so many ticket offices. Their presence inhibits my enjoyment of the Bakerloo Line."

It won't improve service any more than service at a shoe shop would be improved if it shut down and was replaced by a vending machine.

So the main reason why many people have sympathy for the union may be because it seems clear that the closures are one more cut in the quality of a service – to save money in a city awash with wealth, most of which finds its way to a familiar handful of people.

The likelihood is that ticket offices, once closed, will be turned into shops that can "earn revenue" for the Underground. But the Underground

network shouldn't have to pay for itself. It's an essential part of the functioning of a major city.

Otherwise they might as well turn the escalators into log flumes and charge six quid a go, and sell off the Northern Line as flats for people with agoraphobia.

If Transport for London were put in charge of the capital's sewage system, it would shout: "These drains aren't earning us any income at all. Let's sell them to retail outlets, so we can have branches of Tie Rack and the West Cornwall Pasty Company along the bottom, as a pleasant contrast with all this effluence. Or we could close the whole sewage system down, letting it run through the streets, making London the most modern city in the world."

