

Anger over sell-out pay deal at Sheffield Supertram

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22 August 2018

Tram drivers and conductors at Manchester Metrolink expressed shock and disbelief at the pay deal the Unite union recommended to workers at Sheffield Supertram earlier this month.

Unite called off eight days of industrial action planned for August and September, after a sell-out deal was negotiated with Supertram management at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) on August 2.

After five days of strike action in July, the union abandoned the demand for a 50 pence per hour pay rise for all drivers and conductors. Unite recommended workers accept a paltry 30p per hour extra in the first year, 29p in the second year and a 2.5 percent increase in the final year of a three-year deal. The deal is reportedly not backdated to the previous agreement's expiry date. This means drivers and conductors have effectively been fined for striking and will fund their own pay rise.

The revised deal was accepted by a 2-1 majority in a secret ballot ending August 10. Many who voted “yes” did so only because they had no confidence the union would fight for anything better, with some drivers and conductors describing the deal as “a load of rubbish” and “crap.”

Drivers and conductors at Manchester Metrolink, who earlier threatened strike action in support of a separate pay claim, told WSWs reporters they were stunned by the low pay at Supertram. One conductor said he was surprised to learn he earned more than a fully qualified driver in Sheffield, while a driver described the Sheffield pay increase as “a raise in name only.”

Supertram conductors are paid £18,000 a year and drivers around £23,000. Under the new agreement, this will reportedly rise by just £1,700 over the three years for a driver and £1,600 for conductors, far below rates

for drivers and conductors at Manchester Metrolink who are covered by the same union.

Last month, 340 Manchester Metrolink drivers threatened to strike on the August bank holiday weekend for pay parity. Fully qualified tram drivers in Manchester were paid around £28,928 (after three years of service)—£7,000 less than in cities such as Newcastle and London. The starting salary for drivers at Croydon Trams is £28,500, with experienced drivers on £40,000 a year, according to Tram Operations Limited (TOL) that runs the service.

Sheffield Supertram workers must be scratching their heads over Unite's pay strategy. If the union agreed a 10 percent rise for Metrolink drivers—who were underpaid by £7,000—then according to this logic Unite should have demanded a £12,000 raise for workers at Supertram, who are paid about £5,000 less than their brothers and sisters in Manchester. But Unite's strategy is to block any unified campaign by workers at Metrolink and Supertram—and more broadly among tram, bus and rail workers nationally.

On August 7, Manchester Metrolink drivers voted by a large majority to accept a new three-year pay deal, including a 3.7 percent pay rise backdated to January, a 10 percent rise from January 2019 and a further increase linked to inflation in January 2020. This will reportedly take grade three drivers' pay to £33,000 by January 2019.

Unite hailed the Manchester deal as a huge victory for drivers, with regional officer Steve Davies saying: “We are pleased with the very good package that our members have accepted which must be one of the best such deals negotiated in the UK this year.”

But the package includes productivity trade-offs and the pay increase reportedly applies only to drivers with more than 18 months' service. A Metrolink driver told

the WSWS the three-year deal is “not as good as it looks” and that new drivers arriving after September will be hired on lower rates. Another said the deal removed 8 minutes of paid “walk-in” time per shift—“a lot of money across 400 drivers. They are getting a lot more off us than we are being given.”

Aline Frantzen, managing director at KeolisAmey Metrolink (KAM), expressed her delight that “our drivers, who are Unite members, accepted the pay deal,” thanks to “the tireless work of KAM’s managers and Unite representatives to do the best by everyone ...”

Sheffield Supertram workers were repeatedly told there was “not enough money” to fund a decent pay increase, with Unite official Steve Clark telling the WSWS there was only “a limited pot” available. Yet parent company Stagecoach, along with Keolis that operates Manchester Metrolink, are global transport conglomerates worth billions of pounds. They have raked in massive profits thanks to the wholesale privatisation of public transport by governments throughout the world.

Stagecoach employs 34,800 workers across the UK, Europe and North America, has a market capitalisation of £974 million, annual revenue of £3.2 billion and a net annual income of £70.5 million.

Sheffield Supertram MD Steve Bilby told workers during the dispute that any pay deal had to be “realistic” as the company was “at the very limit of what is affordable.” But take-home pay for Stagecoach CEO Martin Griffiths was £987,000, despite presiding over the East Coast train franchise debacle with Virgin that saw the service renationalised.

Keolis, which runs Metrolink in partnership with Amey, operates in 16 countries, employing 54,000 workers across Europe, the United States, Canada, India, Australia and China. In the UK, it operates the Govia, South Eastern and GTR rail franchises, and delivers one in two light rail journeys, including on the London Docklands. It is 70 percent owned by France’s state rail company, SNCF, and 30 percent owned by a Quebec pension fund, with annual group turnover of €5.3 billion and net profit of €50.9 million.

The pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party functioned as a combined PR agency for Unite during the Supertram dispute.

The Socialist Party’s coverage began with a July 9 article by Alistair Tice, which adopted the standpoint of

a Unite official in declaring, “Unite expects that the strength of the strikes and threat of lost revenue will force the company to improve its offer.” He later whitewashed the union’s role in allowing management to run replacement tram and bus services during strikes over the Tramlines music festival weekend, falsely claiming in a July 25 article in *The Socialist* that “hardly any trams were running!”

No articles appeared in *The Socialist* on the dispute’s outcome, but an August 15 Facebook post by its Sheffield branch made clear the Socialist Party’s support for the sell-out. It was headlined: “First ever strikes by Sheffield Supertram workers wins (sic) bigger pay rises and boosts union membership and confidence,” describing the deal as “a victory.”

As craven as the Socialist Party’s efforts were, they were outdone by the Socialist Workers Party. With Unite having called off eight days of further strikes and reneged on its original strike demands, the August 7 *Socialist Worker* ran a report headlined, “Supertram workers look for logical deal.”

What is “logical” for the SWP and for the SP is whatever rotten agreement is struck by the union bureaucracy as dictated by the employers and the demands of the capitalist market. These groups have nothing to do with the fight for socialism. Their every effort aims to prevent a political break by workers from the corporatist and pro-capitalist programme of the unions.

Rank-and-file action committees must be formed at Supertram and Metrolink, so workers can discuss the common issues they face and map out a plan of industrial and political struggle. The trillions of dollars controlled by the major transport conglomerates, private equity funds and banks must be taken out of private hands and used for social need. This includes the provision of high quality and affordable public transport, guaranteeing all workers safe and well-paid conditions of employment.



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