

London bus drivers deliver massive strike vote over “COVID pay,” health and safety

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18 August 2020

Bus drivers at Arriva and Metrolink garages in London have voted overwhelmingly for strike action in two “consultative” ballots held by Unite the past two Fridays.

On August 7, drivers at Arriva North and Arriva South voted to strike for a “COVID payment.” The “yes” vote was more than 98 percent, with 1,675 voting in favour. Drivers are angry that throughout the national lockdown they worked longer hours on Sunday rosters yet received lower Monday–Friday pay rates—effectively a huge wage cut for risking their lives as frontline workers.

On Friday, a separate ballot was held at four Metrolink West garages over the introduction of remote sign-on and a range of other health and safety issues. It resulted in a near unanimous strike vote of 519 out of 523 drivers balloted. At Alperton, Greenford and Willesden Junction, the strike vote was unanimous.

These votes reflect pent-up anger over dangerous and worsening conditions. Last week’s record temperatures in London, for example, saw drivers’ cabins hitting more than 47 degrees Celsius. As one driver commented on social media, slaughterhouses have legal limits on temperature conditions when transporting cattle, but no such protections exist for bus drivers.

Unite organised the ballots little more than two months after 33 London bus workers lost their lives to COVID-19. But as bus drivers were dying in March, April and May, Unite officials joined with Transport for London (TfL), Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan, and bus operators to reject basic safety protections.

The ballots show the willingness of drivers to fight. There is a growing mood for strike action, but Unite’s “consultative” ballot campaign is a fraud.

Drivers already voted for strike action more than six months ago. A London-wide “consultative” ballot was

held on February 7 as part of Unite’s “sick and tired” campaign on bus driver fatigue. That ballot was held months after a Loughborough University study showed that drivers were so tired, they were falling asleep at the wheel. With drivers at the breaking point over the imposition of longer shifts, the ballot delivered a massive 97 percent strike vote.

Unite responded to February’s unambiguous result by promising the union would “now begin the preparations for a full postal ballot of its members,” claiming, “If members vote for industrial action an across London bus strike could be held this spring.”

Instead, that ballot was used by Unite officials as a bargaining chip to deepen their collaboration with the bus companies. A union poster for February’s ballot had called on drivers to “Vote YES and join us in calling on your employer to work with Unite to develop a package of measures to tackle and better manage the root causes of fatigue and stress.”

The outcome of such corporatist backroom discussions has been a disaster for drivers.

Six months after Unite shelved drivers’ calls for strike action, they have chosen to ballot only a small number of garages. They are deliberately dividing drivers on a company by company basis, hosing down opposition and blocking a united struggle of all bus and transport workers across London, the UK and internationally.

Blood money

Workers have called for a COVID-19 payment to make up for wages lost during the pandemic and to

compensate them for the risks they have endured. Yet Unite has only balloted a minority of garages on this demand.

Unite's ballot for a COVID payment did not include a *single demand* for urgently needed safety protections. Unite is accepting that a one-off payment is a fair trade for enduring conditions that pose an imminent threat to life. They will use the vote to accept the right of bus operators to introduce ever more draconian conditions. This amounts to blood money.

Unite has not named an amount for the COVID payments. What value do they and the bus companies place on the life of a driver? Workers already know the answer to this question. The figures being floated of between £2,500 and £5,000 are an insult and will be taken from drivers through further cuts to conditions and pay.

The one-off payment is only for drivers who worked and not those who were placed on furlough. But furloughed workers were only paid 80 percent of their wages and were unable to work because they have health conditions which placed them at high risk of dying from COVID-19. Others were placed on furlough who experienced virus symptoms or were looking after vulnerable or sick family members.

Unite's proposals as balloted are divisive, separating furloughed and non-furloughed drivers. All bus and transport workers should receive an immediate COVID payment of £5,000, but this must be accompanied by immediate steps to protect their health and safety.

Metroline

Unite only balloted four out of 15 Metroline garages and they were not balloted over COVID payments. Holloway and Cricklewood, two of the largest garages in London with a combined workforce of over one thousand drivers, were not included in the ballot.

Unite's contempt for drivers is underscored by the posters they distributed for the ballot, a list of bullet points comprising: "Remote sign-on/off; DAS update; Health and safety (cab sealing, hot and slow buses); Bullying and harassment (failure to support staff); Attack on trade union (failure to consult)."

This grab bag list, with no further details provided, commits Unite to nothing. The remote sign-on being trialled by the bus companies is aimed at slashing costs and will force drivers to travel longer distances—on their own time—to begin work. Ominously, drivers' locations will be continuously monitored via a company app on their own personal mobile phones.

The ballot's three-word reference to "health and safety" is grotesque. The accompanying explanatory text—"cab sealing, hot and slow buses"—deserves an award for gross understatement and hypocrisy. In May, Unite joined with TfL declaring that front door passenger entry could resume because drivers were safe from COVID—as a result of cabin screens designed by University College London. But as the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, UCL did not design the screens, and both TfL and UCL have failed to provide any scientific evidence for their claims that drivers' cabins are safe.

Unite's only real concern is the final bullet point: "Attack on trade union (failure to consult)." Unite has no shortage of consultation with the bus operators. It is an embedded pro-company union which has worked throughout the pandemic, and the preceding decades, to enforce the dictates of bus company shareholders. In April as the pandemic took hold, Unite signed a tripartite agreement with TfL pledging to deliver "industrial harmony" and operational efficiency.

To launch a genuine fight for health, safety, decent pay and conditions, workers must break free from Unite and form independent rank-and-file action committees at the garages. Such committees must unite transport workers, teachers, health workers and other essential workers against the class war agenda of the Johnson government and the financial oligarchy. This means the fight for socialism.



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