

Metroline bus ballot shows massive strike mandate as Unite runs to ACAS

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On October 26, the long-awaited Metroline strike ballot results came through with London bus drivers demanding industrial action against “Remote Sign On” in overwhelming numbers. Once again, bus workers have delivered a massive mandate to fight. Despite draconian anti-union laws, Metroline West drivers voted 97.7 percent to strike and Metroline Travel voted 96.6 percent for industrial action.

Metroline’s response was to immediately threaten legal action against any strike, with Managing Director Steve Harris falsely claiming the vote did not constitute a majority even though the figures he cited showed participation rates of over 50 percent.

Unite’s response was to scurry without delay into the government’s Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), providing a fresh lesson in how the union conspires with the company against bus workers. Unite’s appeal for ACAS talks was praised by Harris who “agreed” on the need to “resolve our differences” through “sensible, rational and measured dialogue”.

Once again, Unite is seeking to betray workers’ desire to fight. Back in February 2020, the London-wide ballot on driver fatigue saw more than 90 percent vote for strike action, but this was sold out and used by Unite to get closer to the bus operators.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, bus drivers risked their lives as key workers while Unite supported the lies of Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan that the COVID risk to transport workers and passengers was “low”. As a result, 29 drivers tragically died in a 12-week period between March and April. Having been denied basic safety protections, drivers took matters into their own hands in opposition to the union. Measures such as rear door entry and the taping-off of seats near the driver’s cabin were instigated from below.

But these measures were far from adequate. Throughout the pandemic, Unite were in secret talks with TfL, Khan and the bus operators. In early April, they signed a letter to say that “we are all in it together” and that personal protective equipment (PPE) was not necessary—these letters were signed by Unite’s John Murphy, Metroline MD Steve Harris and Clare Mann from TfL.

In recent months, separate toothless “consultative” ballots were organised by Unite, on a company-by-company basis, aimed at dissipating and dividing workers’ growing anger. The ballots were called on separate issues and made no mention of the deaths of bus workers or the ongoing threat to life from COVID-19 or of driver fatigue.

Confining the ballot to the sole issue of Remote Sign-On (RSO) was aimed at blocking demands across all London garages for proper COVID safety, while allowing Unite to deepen its collaboration with TfL and bus company executives.

Unite’s agenda is corporatism i.e., working with bus operators and the state to secure profits and ensure a compliant workforce. That is why they have deliberately downplayed the issue of COVID-19 safety. Their secret meetings with company executives and Sadiq Khan behind drivers’ backs were aimed at cementing their role in delivering operational efficiency in “the national interest”. That is why they helped facilitate the Johnson government’s return-to-work in May and June, pushing drivers back onto normal rosters and claiming that bus, rail and underground services were “safe”.

On October 1, the London Bus Drivers Rank and File Safety Committee issued a call for a London-wide strike to demand urgent action to save lives: “A second wave of the pandemic has begun” it warned, “with new

infections already reported by drivers and engineers at Cricklewood, Holloway and Edgware. Across the UK, infections are doubling every week, with scientists predicting 200 deaths a day by November.”

These predictions have already been surpassed. On Saturday night, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a new national lockdown amid daily deaths of more than 300 people. But the government’s lockdown is a farce. It is premised on “herd immunity” with millions of workers and students told they must continue to travel to unsafe workplaces, schools and universities. With hospital intensive care units already overwhelmed in the North of England, scientists are predicting the death toll this winter will far exceed that reached in April.

There is no time to lose. The response to the pandemic must be taken out of the hands of Unite, the bus operators, TfL, Khan and the Johnson government. On September 13, the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed to initiate a fight back and implement urgent safety measures to save lives.

The fight to build independent rank-and-file safety committees in garages and workplaces must be expanded. A national and global network of such committees must be built uniting transport workers with logistics workers, rail workers, teachers, service workers and all sections of the working class until the pandemic is contained.

The fight against the homicidal policy of the ruling class requires a fight against capitalism. Workers’ lives and their right to safety must take priority over the profits of the financial oligarchy! This means a confrontation with the Johnson government and its backers in the Labour Party and trade unions who are functioning as part of a de facto government of national unity. The obscene wealth of the billionaires must be expropriated to fund urgently needed health care, a functioning test, track and trace system, full income protection for all non-essential and vulnerable workers and other necessary measures to protect the public.

The London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands the following:

No more cover-ups! Immediate disclosure of all infections as soon as the company is informed, with immediate notification to drivers by SMS and company app.

Immediate on-site testing and contact tracing for all staff at the garage. All staff required to self-isolate must be paid a full wage.

No victimisations! All staff must be free to speak out on safety concerns and to share information with their colleagues, including on social media, without management and union reprisals.

For the scrapping of Remote Sign-On and a guaranteed ban on the use of company Apps and similar monitoring technology against drivers.

Full back pay for hours worked by drivers during the lockdown.

An immediate reduction in driving hours to no more than 8 hours with no loss of pay. An end to punishing rosters that jeopardise safety.

Regular anti-viral deep cleaning of buses each day and after every rounder on bus routes.

We urge bus and transport workers who agree with this perspective to get in touch and join the committee: londonbusrankandfile@protonmail.com



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