London bus petition to sack Unite official John Murphy withdrawn in abject capitulation

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A petition launched by London bus driver and "union activist" James Rossi calling for the sacking of Unite official John Murphy, has been closed down after just one week. Rossi ended the petition following a weekend Zoom meeting with Murphy.

The change.org petition was started on Monday November 30. It stated, "We the London bus drivers want John Murphy removed from office, it is our opinion that we have been poorly represented by him. We feel that we have been let down time and time again."

By Saturday, 334 bus drivers had signed. Some left comments indicating the pent-up anger among tens of thousands of drivers over the union's collusion with the bus companies. Unite's negligence during the pandemic, alongside Transport for London (TfL) and Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan, contributed to the deaths of 35 bus workers.

Comments included, "Unite don't represent London bus drivers" and "Unite have been letting bus drivers down for years. Our hours have increased our terms and conditions have diminished and our pay has remained stagnant". Another wrote, "I'm signing because Murphy has suspended union reps for daring to voice dissent", while a driver from the North of England signed, commenting, "It's not just him either, we have one in Derby, called Tony Tinley!!!"

Rossi's petition was a political dead-end. Murphy deserves to lose his job, but he is not some rogue official. The policies he has enforced against London bus drivers are those of Unite, and he enjoys the full backing of its leadership. Many of the drivers made clear on the petition that the problem wasn't just Murphy. By singling him out and calling on other officials to replace him, the petition concealed the fundamental character of Unite as a pro-company organisation.

In April, the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed Murphy's role in signing joint letters with the bus companies and TfL, denying workers PPE in the midst of the pandemic and pledging "industrial harmony". So naked was Murphy's collusion that 13 Unite health and safety reps passed a motion of no-confidence and called on Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey, Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner, and Regional Secretary Peter Kavanagh to remove him from office. They explained, "members have very vocally voiced their feelings that Unite have not done enough to protect its members". This was an understatement, with many workers resigning in disgust.

Unite's response could not have been clearer. They backed Murphy unconditionally and launched a campaign of victimisation, demanding the reps recant their criticisms. Three who refused were suspended, with Unite official Peter Kavanagh denouncing them for making a "vexatious" and "malicious attack on our union".

Rossi, known as "Jimmy Buses" (after his Facebook and Twitter accounts of the same name), has drawn no conclusions from this experience. His petition was issued to the same Unite officials—McCluskey and Kavanagh--who have demonstrated time and again their cosy relationship with TfL and the bus operators, and their willingness to suppress any opposition from the rank-and-file.

His petition stated, "we want a new Unite regional officer of our own choice, who we believe in and who is strong enough not only to defend us, but strong enough to fight for our terms and conditions and well-being." He reportedly suggested Unite official Mary Summers as a possible replacement! She is currently overseeing the shelving of a near unanimous strike vote by drivers at Metroline over Remote Sign-On.

A campaign on such a flimsy, primitive and, to be frank, politically opportunist pretext could only end in a rout. Clearly someone from Unite head office had a word in Rossi's ear. On Saturday, he posted a video announcing a Zoom meeting with Murphy and portraying this as a victory: "Joanne Harris [Unite London branch secretary] is organising a Zoom meeting, 10.30am. I think it's a good thing. Our regional secretary of London buses John Murphy will be attending, and this has been arranged due to the petition that I started."

His petition was "not an attack" on Unite, Rossi emphasised, urging his Facebook followers, "This is not the time to leave the union".

All talk of sacking Murphy was shelved, with Rossi stating, "it's good that John's coming". He then made clear that only friendly criticism would be tolerated, telling his followers they should ask "sensible questions" at the Zoom meeting, "Not stupid questions. I don't want any questions, like 'why is the union shit?' That's not a sensible question."

His message concluded, "This is an official meeting, and the lead secretary is still the lead secretary," so "let's all be civil, respectful and polite".

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By all accounts, Sunday's "listening exercise" saw Murphy dominate the "union activists", denouncing his critics as "divs" and "bell ends". The tenor of the "discussion" can be gauged by the comments of a participating driver who posted his reflections on Facebook: "I just cannot accept that we are seen as Bellends and Divs. We obviously are not because we challenge when appropriate. I now truly have no confidence in this union."

Immediately after the Zoom meeting, Rossi summarily withdrew his call for Murphy's sacking and closed the petition to further signatories. His supporters issued a statement explaining they had pulled the petition "as an act of good grace in response to John Murphy somewhat [?] appearing at the Zoom meeting to answer some questions this morning."

They admitted, "We didn't really get too many commitments". In fact, they got just two: a weekly email "update" from Unite, and a promise that minutes from its hitherto secret tripartite meetings with the bus operators and TfL would be circulated. On this basis, they concluded, "we look forward to a brighter future."

This pathetic surrender points to the hopeless character of any struggle to reform the union. Rossi is well aware of Unite's record, but he is part of a group of "union activists", led by members and ex-members of the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, whose defence of Unite is aimed at blocking the growth of an independent socialist opposition in the working class.

In October, Rossi backed Joanne Harris and Socialist Party member Moe Manir's anti-democratic expulsion of Miles Driver from the Bus Drivers in London Facebook Group. Rossi is a moderator on that group. Miles, a member of the Socialist Equality Party and a bus driver for more than two decades, was thrown out because he has played a leading role in the formation of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The committee is organising workers in direct opposition to Unite and the pro-company trade unions based on the fight for a socialist programme that places workers' lives and safety ahead of corporate profit.

Rossi has never explained why he failed to oppose Miles' expulsion from the Facebook group, but the answer is now clear. His unprincipled actions, like those of Manir and Harris, flow from their defence of the union bureaucracy and their insistence that workers must accept its control and domination. Rossi's claim that Unite can be made accountable has burst like a soap bubble, but all they can offer is more of the same, promoting the chimera that the trade unions can be reformed.

It should be added that Rossi is a respected driver. In 2016, he saved the life of a young passenger on his bus who suffered a severe allergic reaction to nuts. After the boy approached him in distress, Rossi announced to passengers that he was going to skip all stops and drive the boy home to get his epipen. His courageous and forthright actions saved the boy's life. But politics is another matter, and those who put themselves forward as leaders are answerable for their public words and actions.

The word "trade union", associated by many, especially older workers, with the organised defence of jobs, wages and conditions, runs the danger of obscuring social reality. Over the past four decades, the trade unions have responded to economic globalisation by integrating themselves into the structures of management, suppressing the class struggle and enforcing the dictates of corporations, governments and the state. This is common to all trade unions, not just in Britain, but throughout the world, regardless of whether they are led by "left-wing", "right-wing", or "rank-and-file" candidates.

Workers in the 21st century cannot defend themselves against globally organised corporations with forms of organisation that were created in the 19th century that are based on the capitalist nation-state. New organisations are needed to conduct the class struggle on an anti-capitalist, socialist and internationalist basis, uniting the working class across the UK, Europe and throughout the world.

Rossi asks in one of his videos, "Are we [Unite] a political organisation, or are we an industrial organisation, a trade union, for the workers?" But there is no such thing as political neutrality.

The unions accept the domination of economic life by global corporations, such as GoAhead (which operates across the UK, Ireland, Singapore, Norway and Germany) and ComfortDelGro (which employs tens of thousands of workers across the UK, Ireland, Australia, China, Vietnam and Malaysia). If the trade unions don't accept the terms dictated by these companies, they will seek profits elsewhere, scouring the globe for the highest rate of return. The union bureaucracy, determined to preserve its privileged relations with management, have responded to this underlying economic and political reality by transforming themselves into an industrial police force for the companies and the state.

Unite's partnership with Sadiq Khan and TfL throughout the pandemic is an expression of this process. Unite suppressed all industrial action to deliver profits and "operational efficiency", enforcing unsafe conditions that have claimed bus workers' lives. This was replicated nationally by Unite and the Trade Union Congress' partnership with Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government with millions of workers herded into unsafe workplaces and schools, spreading infections, and leading to more than 76,000 "excess deaths" in what is a crime against humanity.

The working class faces life and death problems: a global pandemic that has killed 1.5 million people, mass austerity and unemployment, the persecution of tens of millions of refugees and immigrants, the promotion of nationalism and the rise of fascist and far-right parties, and the drive to war.

There is no time to lose! We urge London bus workers to reject the false promises peddled by pseudo-left "union activists" and avoid the next fiasco. To conduct a genuine political struggle in the interests of the working class, contact the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee and the Socialist Equality Party.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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