

Bus drivers to strike at RATP Dev London and Go North West: Break Unite's stranglehold and launch a unified offensive

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Bus drivers are striking today at RATP Dev in London over a derisory pay offer and imposition of inferior terms and conditions. Next week, 400 drivers at Manchester's Go North West Queens Road depot are set to walk off the job, opposing "fire and rehire" contracts that will slash jobs and tear up terms and conditions.

The transport companies are seizing on the pandemic to impose restructuring at the expense of drivers' livelihoods, even as corporate disregard for safety has claimed the lives of more than 88 bus and coach drivers nationally.

Determined resistance has been shown in strike votes at both companies. At Go North West, owned by UK-based transnational Go Ahead, drivers defied threats of dismissal and voted 82 percent vote for strike action on a 77 percent turnout.

Unite the union are seeking to stymie this growing opposition by isolating the disputes and upholding the division of workers along company lines established through the carve-up and privatisation of the bus network. Unite has issued no pay demand in opposition to the company's and has signalled willingness to collaborate with cost-cutting via other means.

In the context of the pandemic, this has only guaranteed a race to the bottom, with garages becoming centres of infection and death, and what remains of the gains won through past struggles torn up.

Drivers at Go North West are set to strike on February 28 against the imposition of "fire and rehire" contracts. According to Unite, the contracts will slash 10 percent of jobs and £2,500 in income for drivers, who earn on average £24,000 a year. They will work longer hours for no additional pay and will receive an inferior sick-pay scheme that will place them under increased pressure to work if they are ill or should be self-isolating due to

COVID-19.

On February 8, the company hand delivered notices to bus drivers at their homes, giving them eight days to sign the new contract, "Go North West is issuing you with notice of the termination of your employment which shall end on May 2021."

Intimidation to enforce an inferior contract has been ongoing since early last year, including the suspension of a local union rep and a Section 188 "fire and rehire" notice in August. These were only withdrawn after a 94 percent strike vote. Unite then entered negotiations with management in September, proposing a one year pay freeze, gouging £200,000 from drivers' pockets and an additional £1 million in "savings". Unite's offer of concessions only emboldened the company, which broke off talks in January and placed a gun to the head of drivers.

Unite has pitched its appeal to the boardroom and shareholders, presenting itself as the most consistent champion of company values. Unite stated of Go North West's managing director, "We believe that Nigel Featham's 'bull in a china shop' actions are now the *biggest threat to the business and its profitability* ." (emphasis added).

In London, this week's strike against French-owned transnational RATP will involve around 2,200 drivers. The company accounts for 12 percent of bus services in the capital

Regional Unite officer Michelle Braveboy has described the strike as a "line in the sand," accusing private operators of using the pandemic as a "convenient smokescreen" to attack terms and conditions. This is an apt description of the role of Unite itself. It has operated a de facto no-strike agreement since the start of the pandemic. In the name of "operational efficiency" and as

part of its tripartite arrangements with Transport for London (TfL) and the bus companies, Unite has suppressed demands for strike action, ensuring the buses are kept running no matter what the cost. Nearly 50 London bus workers have lost their lives to COVID-19 in less than a year.

Unite has repeatedly vetoed strike mandates, including the 90 percent vote for London-wide action against driver fatigue in February 2020 and the massive 97 percent vote for strike action against Remote Sign On (RSO) at Metrolink last October.

Unite's strike at RATP will be staggered, ensuring drivers will not be all-out together across the three days. At London United (LU), drivers will strike from February 22, 23 and 24. At Sovereign, drivers will strike only for 24 hours on February 22, and at Quality Line (QL) in Epsom (Surrey) only for the first two days.

The battle cry "Equal pay for equal work" has long been a dead letter for the unions. At QL, drivers are paid £2.50 an hour less than drivers at other RATP subsidiaries and are the lowest paid in London. They have been offered a pitiful 0.75 percent, while those at LU and Sovereign have been offered 0.5 percent. Drivers at LU have not received a wage increase for two years, having rejected the company's miserly 0.5 percent offer for 2019 and 2020.

LU has offered a one-off lump sum of £1,000 to accept their latest pay "increase", but drivers are being asked to sign away important entitlements in return. This includes an attendance bonus of £13.70 per week, a safety bonus of £1.50 per week and the extension of unpaid meal breaks from 40 minutes to 1 hour, cancelling out the lump sum payment after the first year and leaving drivers worse off.

The company is also demanding "flexibility" over shifts, with a move from guaranteed hours for each working day to a guaranteed 38 hour working week with an unlimited spread over shifts. LU has started signing drivers onto "zero hours" contracts guaranteeing no minimum worktime.

There is evidence that the strike is being sabotaged by Unite. Bus drivers at Stamford Brook garage, with around 400 drivers, told WSWs they have been instructed by the local Unite rep to report to work on strike-days or they may face disciplinary action for absenteeism. The pretext cited is that the strike vote has been counted on an individual garage basis, rather than collectively across the company.

Stamford Brook voted by a 96 percent margin for industrial action, but with a 41 percent turnout it failed

meet the 50 percent threshold dictated by anti-strike legislation. Unite's inability to secure a larger turnout is because it is viewed by growing sections of workers as a pro-company outfit, especially for its refusal to take action over the rise of infections and deaths among drivers from COVID-19.

A driver at Stamford Brook garage who is a supporter of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee explained, "There are 11 drivers off with COVID-19 on the H91 route, three in hospital, one in intensive care and a driver who recently transferred from Hounslow to the garage has died from the virus.

"Unite is undermining the strike. It is covering for the company and weakening the participation. They have separated it between the companies and then in the separate garages within the same subsidiary and then having strikes on separate days. They are going through the motions. In reality, they are in management's pocket."

An organisation which is incapable of defending workers lives against a policy of social murder by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government will not defend their livelihoods.

Workers are in a fight against the pandemic billionaires who view COVID-19 not as a major health crisis but an opportunity to overhaul their terms and conditions to guarantee their further enrichment. Bus drivers must not accept the straitjacket placed on their disputes by Unite.

Against the fire and rehire policies that are a weapon of choice of the employers, and in opposition to the treachery of the trade unions, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is calling on all bus and transport workers to elect rank-and-file committees at their workplace that will unite the strength of the entire working class in defence of jobs, conditions and safety. This fight will place them in a direct political struggle against the Johnson government, its backers in the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress, and the financial oligarchy they all serve.

Such a fight requires political leadership and organisation. We urge workers who would like more information to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact