Bus drivers speak on London strikes: “This is just the spark of a broader fight”

Tony Robson
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A bus driver and member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee at London United Park Royal spoke to WSWS about this week’s strikes at RATP Dev in London. “At Park Royal garage overall it was supportive, drivers are willing to prolong the dispute as long as it takes to achieve their aims. The turnout on the picket line has been high. They had to get four agency drivers and they only drove the [number] 18 bus, but the 220 and 226 were not operating.

“Bus drivers are most aggrieved about the ridiculously low offer and being among the lowest paid on the London network. A night driver at London United is paid £13 an hour in comparison to £16 per hour at Metroline. They also want to take away entitlements such as attendance and bonus allowances which will be gone forever. COVID-19 has opened a lot of people’s eyes, that workers’ lives count for nothing even though we keep everything moving.

“Drivers are pleased to be striking but they are not happy that the vote at London United was not registered as a collective vote and some garages were told they could not participate because they did not meet the 50 percent threshold. They feel that this is just the start of a broader fight. The fact that Unite counted the vote separately at London United and treats the dispute as separate from Sovereign and Quality Line, shows that they are still colluding with the company. Unite wants this struggle to go away.

“Zero hours contracts are being introduced across RATP. Drivers who are on ‘spare’ [meaning they can be deployed across different routes and shifts] would rather stay that way than go on a rota line as they are being given zero hours contracts. In relation to Remote Sign On, these devices are already being trialled at some garages such as Hounslow Heath through the back door—they are being used on the buses instead of using the defect card.

“I do not agree with the stirring up of nationalism over the fact that RATP is French-owned. This should not come into it. Go Ahead, a UK company, is tearing up conditions in Manchester and imposing fire and rehire contracts. RATP strikers are not even aware of this thanks to Unite. This is about opposing exploitation and standing up for workers’ rights. The pandemic has created a gaping hole between the companies and management on one side and the workers who have lost their lives and wages. This is the same around the world.”

A Metroline driver and member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee at Cricklewood garage told WSWS, “We support the action of our brothers and sisters at RATP Dev in their fight. We have heard nothing from Unite about opposing Metroline laying on extra buses to break the strike. That leaves us in a dilemma as we want to support their action but could face punishment. It all comes down to intimidation and union trickery.

“For Metroline to claim that the additional buses were to ease heavy loading is a sick joke. No social distancing is being followed or enforced on our buses. A passenger who was upset about the overcrowding of the bus complained to Transport for London and they were not bothered. There were 26 people on a bus which should have carried only 14.

“With the end of lockdown and the reopening of schools this can only get worse. I am speaking to drivers about what we can do. No one raises their concerns with management because they are worried about reprisals. Unite does nothing. It is just a symbol, but it is not engaged in a fight to protect drivers’ safety.

“Here at Metroline, we voted for strike action against Remote Sign On, but this was overturned by Unite.

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They are totally unreliable and two faced. They pretend to take action, but they are on the side of the company all the time.”

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