

Strike by London bus workers at RATP Dev wins widespread support

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Around 2,000 bus drivers at RATP Dev in London took part in three days of strike action this week, fighting company demands to slash pay and conditions and introduce “zero hours” contracts. The company is acting as a trojan horse for an agenda prepared by bus operators across the capital, backed by Transport for London (TfL).

Support for this week’s strikes from February 22-24 was solid, with most services at RATP Dev garages—covering 12 percent of the bus network in London—ground to a halt. At one of the largest garages, Park Royal, just five buses were operational driven by agency staff who had been drafted in. At Edgware, only five drivers reported for duty on Monday, with a high strike turnout reported at Fulwell, Epsom and Shepherds Bush.

There were sizable picket lines, with drivers volunteering for strike duty and standing up to intimidation. At Park Royal, management called police to try and move pickets on, despite their adherence to social distancing regulations and anti-strike laws limiting the number of pickets at any one time.

Home-made placards expressed the class sentiments underlying the action, comparing the millions of pounds forked out to directors and managers in pay and share dividends to the 7 pence an hour offered to bus drivers. Drivers across London took to social media, supporting the strikes and calling for united action.

This is in sharp contrast to the grovelling line of Unite, which has pleaded with the company to withdraw its insulting pay offer and enter negotiations.

At Go North West in Manchester, where around 400 drivers are set to strike next week against the imposition of “fire and rehire” contracts, Unite has begged the company to “return to the negotiating table” to discuss its alternative plan, including a pay freeze

and major cost cutting at bus drivers’ expense.

RATP Dev is seeking an end to guaranteed minimum hours per workday, a bid that dovetails with London-wide plans for Remote Sign On (RSO) and shift “flexibility” by all the bus companies. A driver from London United told WSWs, “Remote sign-on devices have already been trialled at London United and GoAhead. They are claiming it is a first bus check device, but it’s remote sign-in via the back door.”

A driver at Hounslow Heath said the new devices were introduced without warning some time before Christmas, “We had no say, the company just took us in—and that was that. We are still signing on at the garage, but we have to use the phone to do all our safety checks and sign-in on the bus too. When we first started with the phones, there were 17 checks, but recently three more were added, so it’s also being used to increase our workload.”

Unite has blocked joint industrial action, treating the three subsidiaries—London United, London Sovereign and Quality Line—as separate disputes. Drivers at Sovereign were only involved in the first day of action, Quality Line on days one and two, with only London United out for the entire three days. Unite has not even advanced the demand for pay parity for Quality Line drivers who receive £2.50 an hour less than their counterparts at RATP’s other two subsidiaries.

The most obvious outcome of Unite’s divide and rule tactics was Metroline’s announcement that it would run additional buses to break the strike at London United and Sovereign. Metroline’s claim that it wanted to prevent “heavy loading” of passengers during the pandemic is sickening hypocrisy. The company has institutionalized the flouting of social distancing, instructing its drivers to ignore all distancing protocols in relation to carrying children to and from school. The

company is responsible for the majority of driver deaths in London from COVID-19.

Drivers at Metroline vented their anger on social media over the company's tactics in seeking to pit them against their brothers and sisters at RATP, with many refusing to run the additional services. Unite issued no condemnation of the company's strike breaking activities or call for solidarity.

Unite defends the entire framework erected via the carve-up and privatisation of the bus and rail network, opposing any united challenge against the UK and foreign based transnationals with whom it enjoys a close partnership.

Last October, Unite vetoed a 97 percent strike mandate by Metroline drivers against Remote Sign On, citing company threats of legal action. RSO will facilitate the tendering process between companies, allowing them to compete for routes on a wider basis around the capital. It means drivers do not sign on at garages and must meet their buses at distant locations. It will lead to an 8 percent reduction in wages as they are not paid for travelling time. Bus routes 139 and 238 at Cricklewood garage have already been announced for RSO by Metroline, which is in negotiations with Unite over the details. This confirms what a sideshow the union's re-ballot for strike action is over the issue.

Three more days of industrial action are set for March 3, 5 and 6. Yesterday, a Unite spokesperson refused to confirm whether these strike dates were confirmed, or which companies would strike. Unite refused to confirm whether negotiations would take place before next Wednesday with RATP Dev.

The first industrial action on the bus network nationally was greeted by a virtual news blackout as corporate media outlets devoted themselves to promoting the Conservative government's "road map" for lifting the lockdown. The fact that bus drivers—officially venerated as key workers—face the imposition of pay cuts, inferior terms and conditions and fire and rehire contracts refutes the narrative that we are "all in it together".

The key question in defeating the onslaught of the companies is overcoming Unite's role in dissipating drivers' action and dividing them along company lines.

Any fight against the dictates of the bus companies is automatically a political struggle against the Tory government and its backers in the Labour Party and

trade unions, which have conducted a vast transfer of wealth upwards through the bailout of the corporations while presiding over one of the highest per capita death tolls from COVID-19 in the world.

As Go North West drivers in Manchester prepare to strike on February 28 against "fire and rehire" contracts, bus workers must oppose the segregation of their struggles and establish rank-and-file committees to coordinate the fight to defend their safety and livelihoods.

It is essential that RATP drivers oppose attempts to derail their dispute through the promotion of nationalism, with the company singled out for being French-owned. Bus workers owe no allegiance to UK-owned bus companies that are no less profit greedy and hostile to workers—as the experience of Go North West in Manchester demonstrates.

The pandemic and the offensive against workers' rights knows no national borders. A humane response to the health crisis and a counter-offensive against the pandemic billionaires who are setting a new benchmark for exploitation means closing ranks against attempts to pit workers against one another and unifying their struggles on an international basis.



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