

Go North West bus drivers in Manchester, UK begin indefinite strike against “fire and rehire”

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UK bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester walked out on Sunday in an indefinite strike against company plans to fire the nearly 500 workers and rehire them on inferior terms and conditions.

The Unite union members began their action with a demonstration of about 50 workers outside the Queen’s Road bus depot. Drivers took turns to man the picket line of six outside the main entrance.

The workers voted by an 82 percent majority on a 77 percent turnout to strike. Go North West, part of the multi-billion pound Go Ahead Group, is resorting to “fire and rehire” to drive down wages and conditions. On February 9, the company sent hand-delivered letters to the drivers threatening that if they did not sign the contract, their employment would terminate on May 8.

The new contract would mean a 10 percent pay cut, and the tearing up of the current sick pay policy, forcing drivers to work when they are ill or should be self-isolating due to the pandemic. Their £24,000 annual average wage would be reduced by £2,500.

While Go North West pleads poverty, parent Group Go Ahead recently pulled in £1 billion revenue from its bus division, with an operating profit of £121 million, richly rewarding shareholders. The Newcastle upon Tyne based company has subsidiaries in Ireland, Singapore, Norway and Germany.

Drivers have shown they are ready to fight, voting by 94 percent to strike in a consultative ballot last September, but Unite sought to avoid industrial action, even agreeing to a 12 month pay freeze in recent talks.

In a press release issued on February 24, Unite boasted they had, “entered into detailed cost saving negotiations with Go North West and agreed changes which would have generated savings of £1 million and

also accepted a 12 month pay freeze which was worth a further £200,000 to the company. However, this was deemed insufficient by Go North West and it withdrew from negotiations and decided to fire and rehire its workers instead.”

Over the weekend, Unite representative Lawrence Chapple-Gill told the BBC they had called on the company to “return to that process so we can maximise our joint understanding of each other’s position and hopefully come up with a negotiated settlement.”

Rather than appealing for support from the more than 1.4 million workers which Unite covers nationally, the union has appealed to Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham to intervene in the dispute. Burnham’s sole contribution has been to bolster the company, advocating talks at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service—the graveyard of workers’ struggles.

In a press conference last month, Burnham said he had met with Go North West senior management. While condemning Section 188 notices (fire and rehire) in general, Burnham did not condemn Go North West’s actions. He compared Go North West favourably with British Gas, who are also trying to impose fire and rehire contracts on 7,000 of its workers. “The situation with Go [North West] is slightly different, given some of the issues that are trying to be resolved. But in the case of British Gas, I can’t see one minute how that can be justified,” said Burnham.

On the picket line, a Queen’s Road driver told WSWS reporters, “I think we are treated appallingly, and we are supposed to be key workers. They [the company] will say no pay cuts and no-one is going to lose their job and six months from now they can change

the contract. They will want to do what they're doing in London—Remote Sign On. I thought it couldn't get any lower than First Bus, but Go Northwest, Go Ahead are awful.”

Another driver said, “The new contract affects sick pay and our future. There's been talk about a £5,000 incentive, but the contract affects us long-term. I don't think we are being treated fairly as drivers, we have not really been given a choice. It was a matter of signing it or finding another job. Some of us have been here for ten years, twenty years.”

Asked about the situation with Covid and whether management had informed workers at the garage if their fellow employees had tested positive, another driver replied, “No! We have been raising concerns about some safety measures. To be fair the company made some efforts, like giving us hand gels and putting a screen to prevent us from [catching the virus] ... But there have also been times when we all gathered in the same place when having a break, in a tiny room. Usually, you get individuals online saying, ‘I've got infected and I won't be in for the next ten days.’”

While WSWS reporters were conducting interviews, Unite officials intervened telling workers not to speak to the WSWS because it was “anti-union”. A Unite representative pointed to WSWS leaflets being distributed at the picket line, saying they were undermining unity, while a Unite shop steward intervened declaring he was going to advise his members not to speak to the WSWS. This was a blatant attempt to prevent any exposure of Unite's role in seeking a rotten agreement with the bus companies at the expense of workers.

Two leaflets were distributed by WSWS reporters to picketers, a statement issued by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, *Amid Second wave of deaths: London bus drivers must form rank-and-file safety committees at all garages!* about the deaths of 50 bus workers in London from COVID-19, and a WSWS article headlined, *Bus drivers strike at RATP Dev London and Go North West: Break Unite's stranglehold and launch a unified offensive* .

Around 2,000 London bus drivers are currently in dispute against RATP Dev, which is seeking to impose inferior terms and conditions on its workforce. After three days of strikes last week, Unite is today holding talks with RATP Dev officials. The transport

companies, in direct collaboration with the unions, are taking advantage of the pandemic to destroy workers' livelihoods and safety.

The Socialist Equality Party supports the strike of Go North West drivers and opposes the attempt of the Unite trade union bureaucracy to bar its reporters from speaking to drivers. We call on all drivers to oppose such anti-democratic measures and to reject the attempt by Unite to control what workers can read.



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