UK: Go North West launches strike busting operation to enforce fire and rehire contracts against bus drivers

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4 March 2021

Go North West has launched a major strike breaking operation to force bus drivers at the Queens Road depot in Cheetham Hill, Manchester, to accept a new inferior contract.

The company, which operates 130 buses on 30 routes in Greater Manchester and Warrington, plans to fire the nearly 500 workers and rehire them on inferior terms and conditions including a 10 percent pay cut, the tearing up of the sick pay policy. Their £24,000 annual average wage would be reduced by £2,500. A £5,000 one off payment has been offered in exchange, which would be soon eaten up and isn't available to all due to exclusion clauses.

Go North West subcontracted bus routes out to local and national bus and coach operators, employing workers who are being threatened by their companies to work or be taken off furlough, and from the ranks of the unemployed.

According to the "Go Ahead STOP the attacks on Queens Road" Facebook page up to 13 bus companies are involved in the strike busting. To entice passengers onto these buses, Go North West are offering cheaper £1 maximum price single journey bus fares for the duration of the strike.

Proving that the health and safety of bus workers is of no consequence, a number of the buses involved in the strikebreaking operation reportedly have inadequate COVID protection such as drivers cabins not being properly sealed off. On Thursday, the *Manchester Evening News* reported that Go North West, based on video footage obtained by the Unite union, ran a single decker bus service during the strike with up to 44 passengers crammed onto it. Such buses are normally restricted to 18 passengers, with no one allowed to stand.

While Go North West is insisting that drivers accept pay cuts, they have authorised £46,000 to be spent on 80 new CCTV security cameras around the depot. These can be used to monitor and intimidate pickets during the strike and spy on workers in future. This is pocket change to a firm whose parent company—the Go-Ahead group—reports revenue in the billions of pounds and a recent operating profit of £121 million, despite claims that it is losing money.

As the strike began, a misinformation campaign was launched by the company, claiming that many drivers had volunteered to sign the inferior contracts.

A striking driver on the picket line on Wednesday told the WSWS, "The managing director took us all in individually [into his office] and when we asked for a trade union rep to come in with us, he refused.

"We were given a week to sign the contract and if we didn't sign it we were fired. Management then gave us another week and said if we didn't sign it this time we were being put on notice. So, we had to sign it or lose our jobs."

Management "then put out information saying that we all signed voluntarily. It's just lie after lie after lie. We know the man is lying because his lips are moving."

Workers at the depot voted by an 82 percent majority on a 77 percent turnout to strike against the fire and rehire strategy, with an indefinite strike beginning February 28.

In the face of these attacks, the Unite union is not appealing to other Go-Ahead workers and drivers from other companies to support the Go North West strikers, but has made a series of futile appeals to management, shareholders, potential investors, and local politicians.

Ahead of the strike, the union organised a campaign to e-mail David Brown, CEO of Go-Ahead group, as "He's the top chief of the entire group and our best bet of getting the company to take fire and rehire off the table and get them back around the negotiating table." The e-mail

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states, “As the leader and public face of the Go-Ahead group, you [Brown] can help rebuild the damaged relationship between the drivers and Go North West, and improve industrial relations.”

Unite’s policy was outlined by senior local steward Colin Hayden at a Manchester meeting of the pseudo-left People’s Assembly held online Tuesday.

Hayden said, “Near the end of March, about 70-80 percent of the workforce at the depot was furloughed. Following our pay aspiration claim that we submitted in January the company produced a mass of changes to our terms and conditions and there was no stone left unturned. We had various discussions and the company kept trying to force through the agenda.”

As COVID restrictions were lifted last June, workers at the depot voted “No” to the proposed changes. “When we fed that back to the company… they gave us a deadline to ballot our members. We’d already balloted but they weren’t accepting that outcome.”

In response, the company issued a Section 188 fire and rehire notice on August 14, after which Unite entered further discussions with management based on offering massive concessions to the company. Hayden said, “It was clear to us that the employer was not going to move their position. We moved considerably, and as we got close to December we put a proposal forward which saved, from the drivers’ section alone, up to £1 million.”

Only after management withdrew from talks January 11 and began approaching drivers on an individual basis to get them to sign the new contracts did Unite call an industrial action ballot. Again, they pleaded with the company to come back to the table and agree a deal with drivers while making concessions.

Hayden told the People’s Assembly, “There’s a deal to be done, we were close to a deal, and we need to get the company back round the table. That’s what will end this industrial action.”

Unite is limiting the strike to just one bus depot in Manchester, while seeking to end industrial action at the first opportunity. The struggle is being isolated, with the union making no appeal to the workers at other companies facing similar attacks, even among those who are being used to break the strike, to unite in their defence.

Go-Ahead Group is based in Newcastle upon Tyne but has subsidiaries in Ireland, Singapore, Norway and Germany. Go-Ahead is one of three transport conglomerates with subsidiaries operating buses in Greater Manchester. No appeal is being made by Unite to workers at Stagecoach Manchester which has 2,422 staff, including almost 2,000 drivers—and is the largest UK bus subsidiary of Stagecoach Group outside of Greater London—or drivers at First Greater Manchester to oppose the attacks on pay and conditions at Go-Ahead.

The struggle underway to defeat fire and rehire at Go North West is of vital importance for all workers. As a striker said on the Go North West picket line, “Once this gets in, this will decimate the bus industry, there will be a massive domino effect. Once they do this to the bus industry every other company will do it. So that you turn up for work one day and they say ‘we don't need you today’. How can you live like that?”

The list of employers using fire and rehire measures and other ultimatums to enforce attacks on workers’ pay and conditions grows daily, with disputes at British Airways, British Gas, Transport for London bus companies, Asda and the Banbury coffee factory in the recent period.

The Go North West strike began following a three day strike by almost 2,000 bus drivers in London at another transport conglomerate, RATP Dev, who are fighting company demands to slash pay and conditions and introduce “zero hours” contracts.

Bus drivers are employed by major corporations who operate on a global scale and with unlimited resources. The fight against their rapacious demands cannot be won by the nationally based pro-capitalist trade unions, who operate as arms of management, not organisations that defend workers. A successful struggle depends on Go North West workers acting independently of Unite and other transport unions and forming rank and file committees.

These must turn to drivers and transport workers at other depots for support and fight for a socialist programme, which prioritises the pay and conditions and health and safety of public transport workers above that of the profit drive of the corporations.

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