

RATP Dev and Go North West bus drivers in Britain oppose renewed race to the bottom

Tony Robson
9 March 2021

Around 2,000 bus drivers at RATP Dev participated in a second stage of rolling strikes in London last week which coincided with a first week of indefinite strike action by over 400 bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester who walked out on February 28.

The disputes are inseparably connected as bus drivers confront the imposition of inferior terms and conditions and fire and rehire contracts as part of a drive to establish a new benchmark of exploitation. French owned RATP and UK based Go Ahead, which owns Go North West, are spearheading a renewed race to the bottom.

The private operators are passing the full burden of economic losses from lockdowns and a decline in passenger usage onto the backs of bus drivers who have built up company profits and have remained on the front line from day one. The pandemic has been seized on to overturn long established terms and conditions which are viewed as a barrier to achieving profitability for the multi-million-pound companies.

The resistance of bus workers in London and Manchester has been met with co-ordinated strike breaking operations. In the first week of strikes at RATP Dev, rival operator Metroline ran additional buses on its routes to undermine strike action, while Go North West subcontracted around a dozen private companies to run its services disrupted by indefinite strikes in Manchester. It offered discount fares of £1 and crammed passengers onto its replacement services in breach of social distancing rules.

Collaboration between the private operators stands in contrast to the divisive strategy of Unite, the largest union in the UK, with over 95,000 members on bus, rail, tram and coaches across 150 companies. Unite made no call for solidarity action by Metroline drivers with RATP strikers, such as refusing to run additional

services and pledging to defend their members against any management reprisals. The same holds true in Manchester where smaller operators have been subcontracted by Go North West to break the strike.

Bus workers at RATP and Go North West view their struggle as the start of a long overdue fight-back and a decisive stand against a precedent being set across the bus network nationally and all sectors of industry. As one Manchester picket told the WSWs regarding the imposition of fire and rehire contracts, “Once they do this in the bus industry, there will be a massive domino effect.”

Unite has proceeded as if these struggles are entirely unrelated. At both companies it only sanctioned strike action to siphon off rising class opposition and to convince the private operators that Unite remains the best option to avert mass strikes and to ensure their role as company enforcer is not bypassed.

At Go North West, the union has insisted there is a deal to be made based on its offer of a 1 year pay freeze and an additional £1 million worth of cuts. At RATP Dev, the union has not submitted any counter claim to the derisory pay offer and imposition of inferior terms and conditions leaving the door open to concessions in return for a marginal improvement on what is in effect a pay cut.

Unite London Regional Officer Michelle Braveboy stated, “Bus drivers at RATP are resolved that attacks on their pay and conditions will be abandoned and that they will secure a meaningful pay rise.” What is true of the bus workers on strike however is not true of the union.

After the first week of rolling strikes at RATP Dev, Unite rushed into talks with the company on Monday March 1. RATP Dev responded by dismissing any suggestion of a compromise and no further negotiations

are planned.

Unite has maintained that strikes across the three London RATP subsidiaries—London United, Quality Line and London Sovereign—are separate disputes even though bus drivers are confronted with the same derisory pay offer of less than 1 percent. The removal of established rights and entitlements at London United will have a company-wide effect.

Unite delayed announcing the second stage of strike action while it pursued fruitless talks with RATP Dev. Faced with the company's intransigence, Unite has already scaled back on the rolling strikes held on February 22-24.

Its newly announced strike dates included one day stoppages at London Sovereign on March 3, 10 and 17. London United took strike action on March 5 and 6, with a one-day only stoppage at Quality Line on March 5. At the latter two, Unite has not confirmed any further strike dates.

The union is isolating the dispute and laying the ground for RATP Dev's demands for complete flexibility at the expense of terms and conditions to be rolled out unopposed.

The WSWs has received further reports from bus drivers at RATP Dev that the company is extending the use of zero-hour contracts. Those involved in strike action have been informed their existing contracts no longer apply and they will need to sign new ones. This takes place under conditions in which all new drivers are being placed on zero-hour contracts as are existing drivers who request a change in their rota lines.

The company is also introducing Remote Sign On (RSO) via the back door with Unite's blessing. RSO requires drivers to meet their buses at locations away from the garage and means they are not paid for travelling time—leading to an estimated pay loss of up to 8 percent. RSO will allow rival companies to bid for routes outside of where they are based, leading to the further carve-up of the bus network.

Late last year, London Sovereign introduced hand-held devices for bus drivers in at least one garage to conduct their pre-operational checks. The mobile devices have the capability of being used for RSO. Unite has already accepted RSO at Arriva and Go Ahead, two of the 'Big 5' bus companies in the UK. Metroline has cited this fact against bus drivers opposing its introduction.

Unite was handed two mandates for strike action last year at Metroline, once in a consultative ballot, the other in an official strike ballot. In the latter, Unite vetoed a 97 percent strike vote after the company threatened legal action. No credibility can be placed in its third ballot on the issue involving 4,000 drivers. The union's sabotage of Metroline bus drivers' fight has allowed the company to treat its implementation as a formality with routes already nominated for RSO.

Unite is just as incapable of defending bus workers livelihoods as they have proven in protecting their lives. Its treacherous record in the cover-up of COVID-19 workplace transmission is measured in a death toll that surpasses most other occupations with at least 59 bus workers dead in London—averaging one a week since the start of the pandemic—and 88 bus and coach drivers nationally.

Bus workers must forge links with other sections of workers on the rail, in the National Health Service and education and all the other industries in which lives have been sacrificed in the name of profit and who confront a major restructuring of jobs, terms and conditions. This requires a mobilisation of the working class independently of the Labour Party and trade unions which have defended the interests of the corporate and financial elite no less consistently than Boris Johnson's Conservative government which it continues to prop up.

We urge all bus drivers to contact the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Committee to discuss and organise this fight.



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