

UK: Go North West bus workers strike enters third week

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12 March 2021

Hundreds of bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester are continuing their strike against the company's "fire and rehire" policy. Today is the 14th day in an indefinite strike that began February 28 at the Queens Road depot.

Go North West intends to impose inferior terms and conditions on nearly 500 workers in a fire and rehire plan, including a 10 percent pay cut, and the tearing up of the sick pay policy. Their £24,000 annual average wage would be reduced by £2,500.

The lowering of workers conditions is central to Go North West imposing RESET, its plan to slash £1.8 million from company costs. The plan "comprises a series of productivity enhancing proposals that will turn the company's losses around and return the business to breakeven within three years." Go North West operates in the UK's cut-throat privatised transport network and insists that "RESET only seeks to bring Queens Road into line with working practices already widespread in the industry."

Go North West, which has at its disposal the vast financial resources of its Go Ahead parent conglomerate, is running a massive strike busting operation including contracting around a dozen other bus companies to supply its routes during the strike.

Fire and rehire is being used by a growing number of companies, including British Gas, British Airways, Heathrow Airport, aircraft parts manufacturer SPS Technologies, coffee producing giant Banbury, and Goodlord, which provides services for estate agents in London. British Gas, SPS Technologies workers and Goodlord employees are all striking against these attacks.

The attacks at Go North West can only be imposed because the Unite trade union and its counterparts are isolating workers in every dispute. They do nothing to mobilise their members in a united offensive against this onslaught.

The Go Ahead group operates bus and rail services in Britain, Germany, Norway, Singapore and Ireland. In the UK it employs around 30,000 workers. It has 7,000 staff in London running 2,404 buses and is the largest bus operation in the UK. Not a single worker has been mobilised in support of the Manchester drivers, despite Unite bragging on its web site that it "represents over 80,000 bus workers throughout the UK," and "Unite Passenger Services has a big reputation for solid and militant action to defend its members."

The Manchester strike continues as around 2,000 bus drivers at three companies in the RATP Dev group participated in a second stage last week of rolling strikes in London against a derisory pay offer and imposition of inferior terms and conditions. The London drivers are also Unite members.

Greater Manchester is one of the UK's major transport hubs. Other conglomerates operating buses in Greater Manchester are Stagecoach with over 2,400 staff, including almost 2,000 drivers, and First Greater Manchester which employs hundreds of workers.

It is an indictment of the Unite trade union bureaucracy that drivers, who are also Unite members at Stagecoach and First depots just a few miles from Go North West's Cheetham Hill base, have not been mobilised for support.

This week, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to bus workers at Stagecoach's Hyde Road depot in Manchester. Drivers at the depot of the largest bus company operating in the city were unaware the strike at Go North West was even taking place. The few who knew about the dispute expressed their solidarity and fears that Stagecoach and other drivers could be next. One said, "It's out of order what they're doing at Queens Road. What power have they got to change the contract?" Another said, "We should support them all the way. It's a question of solidarity. What's to say it won't happen here." Asked his attitude to Unite, the driver responded,

“The unions are a load of rubbish, I’m not a member.”

Unite’s pro-capitalist strategy is centred on an appeal to management. The union is diverting workers into 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 purpose of the campaign was to enlist Brown to get the strike over and done with as “you [Brown] can help rebuild the damaged relationship between the drivers and Go North West, and improve industrial relations.”

As CEO of Go-Ahead since July 2011, Brown received almost £1.3 million last year, up from £800,000 in 2017. He has been a major player in the privatised transport industry since the 1990s—a period which has seen thousands of jobs lost, and worsening wages, terms and conditions for those that remain. He was managing director of Go Ahead from January 1998 until Dec 2003, and CEO of London Buses between July 2003 and December 2006. Prior to that he was managing director of London Transport Ltd, and general manager of Centrewest London Buses Limited.

Brown is also a board member of the Rail Delivery Group Limited. The WSWS noted the critical role of the Rail Delivery Group during disputes in the last few years at multiple train operating company who have imposed Driver Only Operated services, with the aim of replacing entirely the conductors job grade and imposing thousands of job losses. The Rail Delivery Group, made up of CEOs from all the private rail companies, was tasked with implementing vast job cuts based on the McNulty Report, which was made Conservative government policy in 2012. Go-Ahead and French firm Keolis jointly controlled Britain’s biggest rail franchise, Govia Thameslink Railway, which runs Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern, as well as Gatwick Express. These firms played a central role in imposing DOO in various forms under Brown’s leadership.

Go Ahead was formed in 1987 as the Go-Ahead Northern Limited with the Conservative government’s privatisation of the UK’s bus network that year. Upon the privatisation of the UK’s rail network in 1996 it entered the rail market. It has grown into an international transport giant with an annual revenue of £3.8 billion.

The corporate multi-millionaire heading this operation is who Unite say strikers should appeal to for a favourable settlement—which Unite has already conceded could include a one year pay freeze and an additional £1 million worth of cuts.

Go North West states that it must impose cuts, claiming it is losing money. Yet it reported a £56.1 million operating profit in the first half of the financial year and a regional bus operating profit of £12.3 million. It had £250.8 million of unutilised facilities and unrestricted cash at the half year end due to the Coronavirus Bus Service Support Grant, which will continue until it is no longer required, according to a financial statement issued this month. As part of its multi-billion bailout of big business, almost £400 million has been allocated by the government to enable the private bus companies in England to keep afloat since the pandemic started.

As one of the very few strikes sanctioned by the unions, the Go North West stoppage has become a cause celebre for trade union bureaucrats and “left” Labourites, who are careful not to forsake a picket line photo opportunity, while mouthing empty calls of “solidarity.” The latest to take a trip to the picket line was local MP Rebecca Long-Bailey, who visited along with Salford Labour Mayor Paul Dennett.

A successful struggle depends on Go North West workers acting independently of Unite and other transport unions and forming their own 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. The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to contact us to discuss the way forward in this vital struggle.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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