Manchester Go North West strike: “Solidarity” meeting provides cover for union and Labour bureaucracy

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The strike by hundreds of Go North West bus workers in Manchester is being led into a dead end by the Unite trade union. Bus workers are fighting the company’s demand that they sign inferior contracts as part of a “fire and rehire” policy.

Unite has refused to mobilise thousands of bus workers across the city and nationally behind the strike, isolating it to the company’s Queens Road depot. It has pushed a futile campaign to win the support of David Brown, multi-millionaire CEO of Go North West’s parent group GoAhead, and of Greater Manchester Mayor, Labour’s Andy Burnham.

The union’s efforts at suppressing a genuine fightback were on display at an online “Go NW bus strike solidarity meeting” hosted by Manchester Trades Council last Saturday. It saw members of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party join forces with Unite officials to promote the Labour Party and conceal their own pro-capitalist political record and programme.

Ian Allinson, executive committee member of Manchester Trades Council and a former member of the Socialist Workers Party chaired Saturday’s meeting. A “grassroots socialist” candidate for Unite General Secretary in 2017, he was elected president of the city’s peak union body just two years later.

Allinson described the indefinite strike as “something that is quite rare. I think it’s over 10 years since we last had one in Manchester, where workers stay out until they win”. His comment was an unintended indictment of the trade unions’ role in suppressing the class struggle. Unite did everything possible to avoid industrial action at Go North West, taking part in weeks of negotiations in which they offered up concessions, only to be rebuffed by a company which wants total surrender.

Pat Gleave, Unite branch secretary at Queens Road, expanded on the union’s corporatist role, “We've offered over a million pounds worth of savings, but it’s not enough for the company who want everything… We've spent six or seven months trying to negotiate, but they’re just not interested… We worked with ACAS [the government’s Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service] who's actually forcing them to at least listen to our proposals, but we've still not got anywhere yet. We've had three meetings with ACAS, but hopefully ACAS will get them to move a little bit”.

Gleave insisted, “Nobody wants to be on strike… It was a daunting prospect to take an all-out strike”.

Labour MP Rebecca Long-Bailey, a prominent ally of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, offered more details about which terms and conditions Unite had been happy to bargain away.

“It is true that the union have made significant compromises and those compromises haven't been accepted,” she said. These included union offers “to revise the sick pay scheme. They looked to get an independent auditor to come in and have a look at scheduling, for example. They looked at extending the unpaid time during meal breaks for a period of two years after which it could be assessed… All of that was refused by the company, and unfortunately talks broke down.”

Dave Roberts, Unite regional officer, said the company was unreasonable in abandoning talks as “there’s well over a million pounds in savings being offered on the table and a commitment to work with the company further to make further changes.”

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All offered their “solidarity”, but there was not a word about spreading the struggle. No call was made to win the support of Stagecoach or First Bus workers in Greater Manchester who run services throughout the region. An online participant noted that “All the regional franchises [of Go Ahead] will be looking for a defeat of the workers in Manchester” and asked if there were plans to expand the dispute across bus, rail and transport. Unite officials responded in the negative, predictably citing “the anti-union laws.”

For decades, anti-strike laws have been ruthlessly enforced by the trade unions as a weapon to suppress the class struggle. Evading any discussion on a campaign to mobilise workers against the laws, a Unite official instead suggested a “national convocation of Go Ahead [union] reps right across the country,” stressing that any call for strikes “would have to come from the members concerned or reps”, i.e., not the national union.

Ian May, a Unite rep from London, spoke on the strikes at the RATP Dev bus company. Nearly 2,000 drivers in London have struck against RATP Dev’s gutting of terms and conditions. Joanne Harris, vice chair of the United Left faction of Unite and a former member of the Socialist Party, also called for “solidarity”. But just like in Manchester, strikes in the capital were deliberately isolated by Unite, with officials refusing to call for solidarity action even as other bus operators organised strike-breaking replacement services. The union’s sole concern was to reach a sell-out deal. Unite has since called off the strike at London Sovereign in return for a miserly pay “increase” of one percent.

Throughout Saturday’s meeting Unite officials insisted that workers should put their faith in local Labour MPs and politicians to pressure the company to settle the dispute. A handful of Labour MPs including Long-Bailey were lauded for their fleeting visits to the picket line.

Long-Bailey rounded off her remarks to the meeting by offering a lame promotion of the city’s Labour mayor, “I know that Andy Burnham met with Go North West, and there's a number of our local MPs who have written, like I have, to Go North West as well.”

Her only advice was, “If your local MP hasn't mentioned anything publicly or even your local councillors, I suggest people to get in touch with them and just make sure that we're putting as much friendly pressure, if you like, on our local representatives to up the ante on this.”

Socialist Workers Party member Karen Reissmann, national executive member of public sector union Unison, provided the most shameful political cover for Burnham and the Labour Party. The previous weekend, Reissmann had been fined £10,000 for organising a socially-distanced protest by NHS workers in Manchester to protest low pay. The protest’s shutdown by police, including the arrest of participants, achieved nationwide publicity, yet Reissmann was silent on Burnham’s support for state repression against the right to protest.

After police ended the NHS protest, a spokesperson for Burnham had declared, “The protest today was rightly a matter for the police to deal with and is not something in which the Mayor has any role. However, under current legislation protests and demonstrations are not permitted, whether we agree with the protest or not, and it is the responsibility of the police to uphold the law.”

In his concluding remarks to Saturday’s meeting, Allinson said, “It has been good to see a number of MPs coming out to the picket line and… I’m sure we’re all waiting with bated breath to see Andy Burnham joining the picket someday soon.”

The meeting was an object lesson in the role of the pseudo-left groups, which operate in alliance with the trade unions and Labour Party to suppress the class struggle and defend the state. To take forward their fight, bus workers in Manchester and London must strike out on a new road by establishing democratic rank-and-file organisations independent of the pro-company unions. We urge workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party today to discuss these critical issues.

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