Unite calls off bus drivers' strike action at London Sovereign and Quality Line

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London United bus drivers were left to strike alone on Wednesday after Unite suspended industrial action at London Sovereign and Quality Line. Unite are to ballot their members over a revised pay offer which constitutes a miserly 0.25 percent and 0.5 percent increase respectively on what was originally presented.

The scheduled one-day stoppage at all three London subsidiaries operated by the French transnational RATP Dev was meant to be the next stage in rolling strike action that began over three weeks ago by around 2,000 bus drivers. Workers at all three subsidiaries faced a derisory pay offer of below 1 percent. At London United, the private operator was not even prepared to offer an increase from the original 0.5 percent.

The fact that Unite is prepared to even consider such a revised offer is an insult to RATP Dev bus drivers who have suffered economic hardship in taking strike action. It refutes the claim that with this dispute the union had drawn a line in the sand. It is also allowing RATP Dev to drive a wedge between the two subsidiaries and London United where bus drivers additionally face the imposition of inferior terms and conditions which would result in a pay cut of around £2,000 per year.

Unite stated in a press release, "An eleventh hour improved pay offer has resulted in strikes planned tomorrow (Wednesday 17 March) by bus workers employed on the Quality Line and London Sovereign services being called off, to allow members a ballot on the employer's proposal."

Unite provided no details of its revised offer in its press release. Bus drivers at both subsidiaries have been offered a revised offer of 1 percent with a £425 lump sum payment as an attempt to induce them to accept.

A Unite spokesperson said the union was not offering a recommendation to either accept or reject the revised offer. This is not a neutral stance but an underhand approach. The union cannot credibly argue for acceptance but is making clear it is not committed to taking the dispute any further.

There is every indication that bus drivers who have taken strike action over the last few weeks and manned picket lines will treat the revised offer with the contempt it deserves.

At Edgware garage operated by London Sovereign a driver commented, "We should still go ahead with the strike as this is not a pay rise at all." Another stated, "What have we gone on strike for and lost 3 days' pay, to accept 1 %! How long will it take to recoup the money we have lost? We have to get a proper pay rise not a waste of time."

But more is involved than rejecting the company's insulting offer. It is necessary to mobilise independently against Unite's sabotage of the fight against RATP Dev.

The first strike action on the national bus network since the pandemic hit has shown the full extent of class divisions. The defiant stand by bus drivers has been fuelled by anger that their lives have been treated as expendable by the private operators.

On the picket lines, strikers have contrasted the offer of a pitiful 7 pence an hour raise for drivers with the fortunes of the shareholders and salaries of the executives of the multi-million-pound company.

The rolling strike action at RATP Dev in London has coincided with indefinite strike action in Manchester at Go North West operated by the largest UK bus operator Go Ahead against the imposition of fire and rehires contracts. Industrial action by a relatively small proportion of bus drivers has met with co-ordinated strike breaking operations in both disputes.

The rival private operators have proved far more

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effective at joint action than Unite, which has made no appeal to its membership of over 80,000 transport workers across 150 companies to come to the aid of their embattled brothers and sisters.

The principal reason for this is not the anti-strike laws which the unions have slavishly followed to discipline militant opposition. Unite—as is the case with all the unions—no longer functions as defensive organisations of workers.

At Go North West, Unite has called for the company to return to talks based on union proposals to freeze pay for a year and an extra £1 million worth of cuts. At RATP Dev, the union has never presented a rival claim to the company's derisory pay offer and imposition of inferior terms and conditions to leave the door open for a sell-out.

Unite sanctioned industrial action in a bid to siphon off the genuine opposition among bus workers into channels which would not undermine its partnership with RATP Dev by igniting wider opposition to the renewed race to the bottom. At all times this has been about preserving its role as chief industrial policeman.

Only last week, Unite Regional Officer Michelle Braveboy made a cameo appearance on the picket line at Edgware garage stating, "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 cynical and empty rhetoric. Braveboy is now presenting as an "improved offer" the 0.25 percent uplift at London Sovereign to a single percentage point. Bus drivers at Quality Line, the lowest paid on bus routes operated by Transport for London, who receive £2.50 less an hour than their co-workers at the other RATP Dev subsidiaries, are supposed to view favourably a 1 percent increase to their meagre pay.

The rolling strike action over the past two weeks has presented only a semblance of unified struggle while Unite has kept drivers across the three subsidiaries and in Manchester separated by a Chinese wall. It has pursued talks behind the scenes, drip feeding information and sowing confusion and disunity.

The predictable consequence of this divide and rule approach has now come to pass. While seeking to soften workers up at London Sovereign and Quality Line for what is essentially a repackaged pay cut, Unite is prepared to hang London United bus drivers out to dry.

Announcing the suspension of strike action at London Sovereign and Quality Line, Unite stated, "the offer for workers at London United did not fully remove the company's planned attack on terms and conditions and as a result the strike will go ahead as planned."

In an update to Unite members at London United last week, the union had claimed the company was prepared to relent on its main demands to eliminate the attendance bonus and safety allowance and lengthen the period of unpaid meal breaks from 40 minutes to 1 hour. However, it would not entertain any discussion on new starters and whether they would be employed on the same terms and conditions or any retreat over the 0.5 percent pay offer, even half the negligible amount offered at the other RATP Dev subsidiaries.

How London United bus drivers are meant to defeat this when they have been cut adrift from their fellow workers across RATP Dev is not explained.

The strike must be taken out of the hands of Unite and enjoined with the defence of bus drivers' lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. RATP Dev strikers must forge links with those on indefinite strike at Go North West in Manchester and build solidarity among all bus workers against the strike breaking operations being mounted.

This can only be carried forward in an independent struggle against the trade unions and the Labour Party who are fully aligned with the Johnson government's herd immunity policy to sacrifice workers lives to guarantee the flow of corporate profits and the wholesale destruction of their jobs, terms and conditions which is now underway.

We urge all those interested in waging such a fight to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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