Unite calls off strikes at London Sovereign and Quality Line, paving way for sell out

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Unite called off strike action at RATP last Wednesday in a bid to push through sell out agreements at all three London subsidiaries of the French-owned transnational.

Over 2,000 bus drivers at London United, London Sovereign and Quality Line have taken rolling strike action since the end of February. The action has hit bus services in north, west and south London.

Unite's last-minute cancellation of industrial action followed negotiations on a subsidiary-by-subsidiary basis to impose a settlement that deprives bus drivers of a genuine pay increase.

It was the second week in a row that Unite suspended strikes. It called off action at London Sovereign and Quality Line Wednesday March 17 to ballot its membership on Friday March 19 over a revised offer of 1 percent (up from 0.75 percent) plus a £425 lump sum.

At Quality Line, the 1 percent rise was accepted at its Epsom garage. This is a 14 pence an hour increase for drivers who are paid £2.50 less an hour than those at RATP's other subsidiaries. They are the lowest paid bus drivers on routes operated by Transport for London (TfL).

While Unite stated that the strikes would "draw a line in the sand" over low pay, it never advanced the demand for pay parity. Instead, the union has ensured that Quality Line drivers remain at the bottom of the unequal pay structure across the company and the entire London bus network.

Unite's claim that it was neutral over the offer is contemptible. Its decision to ballot over the company's negligible offer was de facto agreement. Unite touted the miserly uplift as an improved offer. Despite this endorsement, the agreement was voted down at both Harrow and Edgware garages, with Edgware voting by 3 to 1 to reject.

The union immediately went back into talks with management to come up with a meagre uplift—an increase of 0.25 percent to 1.25 percent and the lump sum increased from £425 to £500. This served as the pretext for suspending the strike once again to ram through an unjust settlement.

The vote to accept on March 26 met with significant opposition. Harrow garage voted 60 to 45 to reject. At Edgware, 57 voted to reject with 155 voting to accept. This means a third of bus drivers were prepared to defy the union. Many others will have voted in favour reluctantly, convinced that Unite would fight for nothing more.

Unite argued for acceptance of the 1.25 percent based on farcical claims that its settlement over the backdated pay claim for 2020 will pave the way for an improved pay claim in the upcoming financial year. Workers who manned picket lines across all three RATP subsidiaries and were looking for a serious fight have been saddled with a miserable outcome that undermines their collective interests.

At London United—the largest of RATP's London operations—Unite was unable to come back from its extensive negotiations with management with an offer it could even justify putting to a vote.

Management have not even offered a token increase on the original offer keeping with the original 0.5 percent for 2019. In relation to 2020 pay award it has repackaged the 0.5 percent to include the £1,000 lump sum to dress it up as 1.2 percent.

RATP insisted that it would not remove the New Starter contracts based on inferior terms and conditions for new drivers, which includes an increase in unpaid meal breaks from 40 minutes to 1 hour. The company was also unwilling to step back from the roll out of zero-hour contracts for established drivers whose routes

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have been lost to competitors and who have been transferred over to other routes within London United, and for drivers who request new rotas.

The union's pretext for suspending strike action stands completely exposed based on the unicorn of "a meaningful offer." London United bus drivers are scheduled to strike on March 31 and many will want to vent their opposition. But the union has ensured such action—if it does not veto it yet again—will be isolated.

Unite's horse trading with RATP has left drivers at London United out on a limb and ended the dispute at London Sovereign and Quality Line based on rotten pay deals.

On March 1, Unite stated in a press release, "In a divide and rule approach, RATP is attempting to treat workers in each subsidiary differently and play one set of workers off against another." Events during the dispute have demonstrated that Unite serves as the chief instrument for the company in enforcing this divide and rule strategy.

The strikes at RATP were only sanctioned by Unite to head off a long-brewing confrontation over pay and conditions, that has been fuelled during the pandemic. Over the past year, the lives of bus workers have been sacrificed to defend the profits of the private operators.

Unite officials sought to ensure that limited and staggered industrial action did not provide a focal point for wider opposition. While rival operator Metroline ran additional bus services to undermine the strike, Unite refused to call for solidarity action, even as Metroline drivers were being balloted over plans for Remote Sign On.

This has been repeated on a larger scale at Go North West in Manchester. Bus drivers there have been on indefinite strike since February 28 against the imposition of fire and rehire contracts. Parent company Go Ahead—the largest private bus operator in the UK—has subcontracted its routes to an armada of smaller operators in a major strikebreaking operation. But Unite has refused any appeal to drivers across Manchester to defeat these plans.

Unite has presented RATP and Go Ahead as rogue operators rather than the spearhead of an offensive by the major transport companies, and on this basis has kept the struggles isolated.

In London and Manchester, Unite has aimed for a negotiated settlement that preserves the profits of the corporations. The union has pitched itself as a responsible business partner, appealing to Go Ahead's CEO to support a £1 million cost-cutting programme and one-year pay freeze. At RATP it has helped to impose a derisory pay settlement and the imposition of inferior terms and conditions.

The experience of workers at RATP and Go Ahead is an object lesson in the corporatist transformation of the unions. RATP drivers' opposition to Unite's sell-out has confirmed the need for rank-and- file committees—democratic organisations of struggle, independent of the unions, which can mobilise the strength of the working class.

As Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government ends "the final lockdown" and reopens the economy for business, RATP and Go Ahead's actions reflect the class war agenda of the entire ruling class. Fire and rehire contracts are being rolled out across transport, the energy sector, telecommunications, and manufacturing. These are not sectional disputes. They are part of efforts to make the working class pay for the gargantuan bailouts to the corporate and financial oligarchy during the pandemic.

In opposition to the Labour Party and trade unions, who serve as willing accomplices to the Johnson government, the working class must advance a socialist programme to fight austerity, authoritarianism and war, in unity with workers throughout the world. We urge bus and transport workers to register for the meeting being held on Saturday, April 10, sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party, to establish a network of rank and file committees.

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