

UK: Workers must adopt new strategy to defeat union's isolation of Go North West bus strike

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5 April 2021

The indefinite strike by almost 500 bus workers at Go North West in Manchester has entered its sixth week.

The company is seeking to impose an inferior fire and hire contract that will see huge cuts in pay and wipe out long-established terms and conditions. Workers face cuts in pay of up to £2,500 a year, with Unite the union stating that the firm plans to also impose a 67 percent cut in sick pay for workers with over five years' service.

As it stands, the company will sack hundreds of striking Go North West strikers in just over a month's time, having set a deadline of May 8 for workers to sign new contracts or be fired.

Last Thursday, the latest round of talks between Go North West and Unite, held under the government's mediation service ACAS, failed to reach agreement. This was despite Unite putting forward proposals to save more than £1.3 million in costs.

The union is proposing that these savings come out of workers' pockets. In an online meeting held by the local trade union bureaucracy last month, Unite regional officer Dave Roberts said the company had abandoned previous talks despite the fact that "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." Local Labour MP Rebecca Long-Bailey said that included in Unite's cost cutting proposals were proposals "to revise the sick pay scheme. They [Unite] 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..."

The company mounted a well-planned strike breaking operation to keep its services on the road, resulting in a strike of hundreds of workers having no impact. Go North West is paying around a dozen other bus and coach firms

throughout Greater Manchester to run its services and has lowered fares to a standard £1 for the duration of the strike. These are not operating from Go North West's depot in Cheetham Hill, where picket lines are mounted, but from a depot at Heywood Distribution Park in Rochdale—one of the eight Greater Manchester councils run by the Labour Party.

The company has been able to carry out its operations unhindered and continue to run its 30 routes in Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Trafford and Warrington because Unite has refused to mobilise bus workers across the city and nationally behind the strike, isolating it to the Queens Road depot. Its entire campaign has been based on securing a rotten sellout deal by offering up workers' terms and conditions and telling its members the way forward is to win support from David Brown, multi-millionaire CEO of Go North West's parent group, GoAhead, and the pro-big business Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham.

The Unite bureaucracy is being assisted by a gamut of pseudo-left organisations, covering for its role as an arm of management. This was the sole purpose of the event called Saturday in support of the Go North West strike by the People's Assembly, in collaboration with Manchester Trades Council, the official representatives of the trade unions in the city. The People's Assembly launched in 2013 is a coalition of pseudo-left groups, Stalinists, trade union bureaucrats and "left" Labourites.

Given the title "Drive The Tories Out! Solidarity with Go North West bus strike. Save Jobs, Save Lives, Safe Workplaces", the Manchester event presented Unite as leading a titanic struggle on behalf of workers everywhere. Supposedly the Manchester leg of a national initiative, a "cavalcade" consisting of a few cars drove a few miles from the Didsbury area of the city to the Go

North West Queens Road depot, where people were asked to stand on either side of the road waving Unite flags.

Those attending consisted of the strikers and their families, local union officials and officials from a few other cities replete with their Trades Council banners, and representatives of Stalinist and pseudo-left groups, including the Communist Party, Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party.

The rally was hosted by Ian Allinson, who described himself as the “industrial action coordinator for Manchester Trades Council”. Allinson, a former Socialist Workers Party member, was a “grassroots socialist” candidate for Unite General Secretary in 2017, before being elected president of Manchester’s union body two years later.

Speakers claimed that the strike was a great success, but were unable to conceal the reality of Unite’s naked attempts to sell it out. Unite senior rep, Colin Hayden, said that from “day one” the “labour movement has rallied around.” Everyone knows this is a lie.

It was left to regional secretary Richie James to reveal the scale of Unite’s capitulation to the company prior to and over the course of the strike. James explained how Go North West Managing Director Nigel Featham held a meeting on August 5 last year. “We offered as a trade union to try and improve the financial position of the company because it was losing money, no two ways about that.” Following the meeting, the company concluded that Unite had not surrendered enough and he “introduced fire and rehire”.

Unite met Featham again on December 23 and “we actually put forward another plan [offering the company huge cost savings]. He [Featham] left the meeting saying it’s the best meeting he’s been at and is optimistic about the future and then what he did was he executed and implemented fire and rehire. He gave everybody eight days to sign the new contracts.”

Unite had held many meetings with Featham, said James, culminating in the latest offer in the failed talks of £1.3 million in cost cutting savings.

Unite has not mobilised a single other bus or transport worker in support of the Go North West strike, not even among the tens of thousands employed in the Go Ahead group. Moreover, the Manchester strike is taking place even as strikes by bus workers in London, who are Unite members, are taking place against the same onslaught on terms and conditions.

Feeling exposed, James felt obliged to raise the fact that “Importantly, one in 10 workers is affected by fire and

rehire nationally. That’s a lot of people. We haven’t joined up our campaigns yet [where fire and rehire offensives are being rolled out against Unite members] but we need to do that in the East Midlands and Heathrow.”

Go North West workers must draw the lessons of their struggle or their strike will be defeated. Fire and rehire has become the preferred option of the corporations in imposing their profit driven agendas. Last week British Gas carried out its threat to fire hundreds of workers who refused to sign up to an inferior contract. They were able to do this because of the sellout of their strike by the GMB trade union, who advised workers to sign new contracts and mobilised no other workers in the energy sector in their support. The GMB, after calling a series of sporadic strikes have called a one day strike for April 14—the day when any worker who has not yet signed up to the new contract will be fired by British Gas!

Workers at Go North West, British Gas and elsewhere are not just up against billion pound corporations but are in struggle with organisations that call themselves “unions” but who act as partners of the corporations. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for workers to adopt a new strategy and organise independently of the trade unions and all the official parties by establishing rank-and-file safety and action committees in all workplaces.

On Saturday, April 10 at 2pm the SEP is hosting a public meeting to Form a Network of Rank-and-File Action Committees for Safe Workplaces! We urge all workers, students and young people who agree with the necessity for a new strategy based on class struggle and building new fighting organisations based on a socialist programme to register today to attend.



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