

# Ex-Unite activists call on London bus drivers to join RMT: From the frying pan, into the frying pan

Laura Tiernan, Michael Barnes  
6 April 2021

London bus workers have experienced a toll of illness and death from COVID-19 up to three times greater than the national average. More than 60 bus workers are dead, with dozens more hospitalised or left struggling with long-COVID.

Last April, confronted with a first wave of infections and deaths, anger erupted against the collusion of Unite the union with the bus companies, Transport for London (TfL) and its chairman, Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan.

“They are doing nothing to protect us!” drivers told the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 10. Fury was directed against Unite’s joint letters with TfL and the bus operators instructing drivers that personal protective equipment (PPE) was “not recommended”. Throughout those early months, Unite echoed the false claims of Khan and the Tories that COVID-19 posed a “low risk” to transport workers and passengers and that handwashing would provide adequate protection.

A wave of resignations from Unite at London garages is proof that many drivers now see it as a pro-company union. Under these conditions, a small group of former Unite reps and activists are calling on workers to join the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), which they claim represents a genuinely militant and left-wing alternative. But switching from one union to another will do nothing to resolve the fundamental problems facing bus and transport workers, which are the same problems that confront workers in every sector and industry worldwide.

Save for its more militant rhetoric, there is nothing to distinguish the RMT from Unite. Its record over the last decade includes ending strikes against the closure of ticket offices on the London Underground and wearing down UK-wide opposition by rail drivers and conductors to the introduction of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains. Despite repeated strikes against DOO since 2016, RMT officials forced through sell-out deals at ScotRail, Greater Anglia, Southern and West Midlands Railway that watered-down the safety-critical role of conductors. Like Unite, the RMT shelved strike votes in 2020, lining up with a de facto no-strike agreement by the Trades Union Congress based on appeals for national unity during the pandemic.

London bus drivers already have first-hand experience with a so-called “left-wing” trade union. For more than a decade, Unite was portrayed as Britain’s biggest such union. Len McCluskey, its current general secretary, was dubbed “Red Len” by the press, declaring in 2010 that his aim was the “achievement of a socialist economic, social and political system, by means of both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary approaches.”

A member of the Labour Party since 1970 and a supporter of the Militant Tendency during the 1980s, McCluskey was Jeremy Corbyn’s main ally during his tenure as Labour leader, helping him to politically neuter and crush left-wing and socialist sentiment in the working class,

most infamously through his role in blocking the de-selection of Blairite MPs at Labour’s 2018 national conference. This supposedly “left” union has done everything possible to suppress strike action among its 1.4 million members across key sectors including transport and manufacturing, in the face of staggering social inequality.

Whether under “left-wing” or “right-wing” leadership, today’s trade unions function as corporatist partners of the employers and the state, ruthlessly enforcing pro-market reform against the working class. This is a universal process, reflected in the evolution of union organisations on a world scale.

The globalisation of capitalist production in the 1980s cut the ground beneath the national-reformist programmes of the labour parties and trade unions in every country, shattering their ability to extract concessions from the employers. With capitalists able to relocate offshore and exploit the cheapest sources of labour, along with tax breaks and investment incentives, unions responded by repudiating any defence of even the most minimal reforms, offering up their “own” members at internationally competitive rates of pay and slashing conditions in a never-ending race to the bottom. In this process, union officials have assumed the role of joint stockholders and business partners.

The unions have a vested interest in suppressing industrial action and blocking any threat to the stability of financial markets.

Unite today resembles the very corporations it colludes with. It has been an active participant in the growth of speculative finance that has enriched a parasitic financial oligarchy. Unite has £340.6 million in general funds, operates £1.1 billion in pension funds, and has access to £50 million in shares. Its annual accounts for 2018 (the most recent available) show 272 valid strike ballots where a ‘yes’ vote resulted that year, but just 73 resulted in strikes.

Unite senior officials enjoy salaries and lifestyles that place them firmly in the top 5-10 percent of income earners. McCluskey’s gross salary is £96,095, but this excludes expense claims. Unite’s accounts show the extent of the pork barrelling—£2.9 million for “committee and council expenses”, £8.3 million in “sundry expenses”, £3.1 million for “expenses for conferences”, £458,000 for “expenses of executive committee (head office)” and £10.5 million in “payments to regions and branches”.

The RMT’s decades-long evolution toward corporatism is fundamentally the same. Founded in 1990 as a merger of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and the National Union of Seamen (NUS), the RMT covered sections of the working class with militant traditions of struggle. But it came into existence under conditions of the terminal decline of the trade union movement in Britain and all over the world.

Bob Crow, a Stalinist from the Communist Party of Great Britain, was the union’s assistant general secretary from 1992 and its general secretary from 2002 until his death in 2014. He was held up as a latter-day Arthur

Scargill (National Union of Mineworkers president, 1982-2002), someone prepared to launch militant action in defence of his members. But those drawing the comparison, including Crow himself, never bothered to explain how the British miners' strike of 1984-85 was betrayed.

Scargill had opposed any political struggle against the Trades Union Congress and Labour bureaucracy's deliberate isolation of the miners. Despite unofficial strikes among rail workers, dockworkers and lorry drivers, the TUC and Labour Party blocked the development of a general strike to bring down the Thatcher government. By the time the RMT was founded, Scargill had repudiated any perspective based on militant industrial struggle, advocating a nationalist alliance with the employers to "Save Our Pits".

Crow was a continuation of everything that was negative and backward looking in the British workers' movement. He combined tub-thumping demagoguery and calls for limited strike action with attempts to find a "productive" working relationship with the government and employers. He opposed privatisation, wanting a return to the post-war nationalised industries, but his appeals were directed to a Labour Party that was evolving into a Thatcherite free-market enterprise under Tony Blair, mirroring the evolution of social-democratic parties throughout the world. In 1997, Crow briefly joined Scargill's Socialist Labour Party (SLP) that proclaimed its defence of "real Labour values", opposing the Blairites' ditching of Clause 4 (public ownership of industry) from the party's constitution and calling for a British exit from the European Union. The SLP soon descended into factional in-fighting and political obscurity.

Crow's politics was underpinned by economic nationalism. He was a lifelong advocate of the Stalinist "British road to socialism", a reformist programme coupled to calls for "peaceful co-existence" between capitalism and socialism and the defence of Britain's "national independence". This found reflection in the RMT's early advocacy of the "Say No to the EU" campaign, with Crow claiming that Britain's withdrawal from Europe would open new vistas for workers' rights based on the return of "national sovereignty". Such a nationalist programme, with its denunciations of "social dumping, whereby cheap foreign labour displaces local workers", was a criminal betrayal of socialism that led inevitably to collaboration with the most right-wing forces. Speaking at the UK Independence Party's conference at Eastbourne in 2011, Farage paid tribute to Crow's support for the anti-EU cause, "He is 100 percent a British patriot in every regard and every way".

Crow pioneered the "left-wing nationalist" arguments later taken up by the RMT and large swathes of Britain's pseudo-left in the 2016 Brexit referendum. The "Left Exit" camp, led by the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, claimed Britain's leaving the EU would strengthen the fight for socialism under a Corbyn-led Labour government. Such arguments served to block a genuine left-wing alternative to the EU cartel of bankers, that could only be based on the unification of the working class in the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe. Instead, the working class was subordinated to a pro-Brexit faction of the ruling class led by the Tory right. Class lines were obliterated, summed up in George Galloway's invocation, on a platform shared with Farage, "Left, right, left, right, forward march to victory".

While claiming to be progressive and "anti-racist", the RMT routinely promotes nationalist divisions in the working class. It denounces a "foreign takeover" of Britain's railways, declaring "under the Tories, any state can run our railways other than the British state."

In 2016, RMT officials, joined by members of the Socialist Party, hung German flags over Newcastle railway station, seeking to channel workers' anger over cuts by Deutsche Bahn into anti-German sentiment. This criminal pitting of British workers against their class brothers and sisters on the continent also aims to deflect from the RMT's collaboration with the rail companies, including UK-based transnationals' savage attacks on transport workers across the UK, Europe and internationally.

Those former Unite activists praising Crow reflect the myth-making of his legacy by the pseudo-left Socialist Party, Labour "lefts" such as Corbyn and John McDonnell, and the Stalinist *Morning Star*.

Tributes to Crow from right-wing politicians and business leaders following his death in 2014 get closer to the truth, with Boris Johnson telling the BBC that Crow was not a "left-wing ogre... If anything, he was more moderate than some of the other characters in the RMT," adding that he was the man you would go to "if the deal was to be done."

Mike Brown, then managing director of London Underground, recalled in the *Evening Standard*, "Bob Crow agreed with TfL Commissioner Peter Henty and me on much more than the media headlines might have suggested," reminiscing that, "strikes would be called off at the last moment with claims of major new concessions having been wrung out of us, which was never true".

In Britain and throughout the world, workers are coming into struggle against savage austerity, saddled with organisations hostile to their most basic class interests. The trade unions, rooted in the nation-state, advance the programme of corporatism, working in partnership with company boardrooms and government ministers to enhance the competitive position of their "own" industry. Hence the RMT's participation in the Tory government's Rail Industry Recovery Group whose remit is to slash pay, conditions and pensions.

Unite's version is a "radical blueprint to transform UK manufacturing" based on its call to "Build local—Buy UK" and "bring back the thousands of manufacturing jobs that moved overseas." This programme of economic nationalism—whether espoused by Boris Johnson or Jeremy Corbyn; Donald Trump or Joe Biden; Unite or the RMT—leads inevitably to trade and military war. The RMT's campaign on the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) attests to this, linking the fight for better pay to the RFA's role in "protecting the UK's strategic and security interests" in operating supplies for the Royal Navy.

If these issues are not more widely understood in the working class, this is down to the role of pseudo-left groups who specialise in providing "socialist" credentials to pro-capitalist organisations. The SP's campaign to elect Steve Hedley as RMT general secretary is a case in point. A former SP member, Hedley has served as Senior Assistant General Secretary of the RMT since 2012. In February, the SP's newspaper reprinted Hedley's election statement, in which he proclaimed, "The bosses will fear me as general secretary as they know I cannot be bought or intimidated!", pledging, "I will work closely with the national executive council, officers and reps to defend jobs, safety, terms and conditions, and pay."

Hedley's entire election campaign is a cover for the RMT's participation in the Johnson government's Rail Industry Recovery Group. There is no public record of Hedley opposing the RMT's participation, let alone mobilising rail workers against this committee's backroom plans to gut workers' jobs, pay, safety and pensions.

The pseudo-left's support for Hedley—and its willingness to promote the RMT as a militant union—rests on its leading role in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC). Founded in 2010 as an electoral alliance of pseudo-left and Stalinist groups with the trade union bureaucracy, TUSC is viewed as a critical mechanism for protecting the trade union apparatus under conditions of escalating class struggle.

After Corbyn became Labour leader in 2015, TUSC was effectively mothballed as efforts by its alliance members focused on electing a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government. Their promotion of Corbynism as "21st century socialism" was aimed at suppressing the class struggle, trapping radicalised workers and youth behind the doomed project of achieving socialism through the Labour Party. In the midst of the pandemic, TUSC has been relaunched, aiming to divert new sections of workers and youth seeking a way to fight the pro-Tory agenda of Corbyn's anointed successor, Sir Keir Starmer.

There are no short-cuts or easy answers to the problems facing the working class. The road forward depends on drawing the lessons of the past, and this means turning to socialism. The socialist movement—led today by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties—embodies the entire history of the working class and the fight for socialism since Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto.

The fight against austerity, combatting the turn to police repression, attacks on migrants and the drive to war, requires the building of new organisations of class struggle. A network of rank-and-file action committees, independent of the unions, must be built up, linking workers across industries and national borders, and advancing policies to meet the urgent social needs of the working class during the pandemic for secure and well-paid jobs, affordable housing, access to healthcare, the protection of immigrants and refugees and opposition to militarism and war.

We urge all those who want to participate in this struggle to attend this Saturday's meeting called by the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**