UK: Unite online meeting for Go North West strikers promotes cost cutting and alliance with Johnson government

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Unite the union has once again used an online meeting, supposedly organised to rally support for over 400 Manchester bus workers on strike against fire and rehire contracts at Go North West, to champion its efforts to end the dispute based on a proposal for at least £1.3 million in cuts.

The April 7 "Unite Politics" Facebook event, "Manchester Bus Strike: End Fire and Rehire," was an occasion for empty rhetoric and platitudes, aimed at hoodwinking Unite members into believing Go North West, its parent company Go Ahead, and Boris Johnson's Conservative government could be persuaded to mend their ways.

The binary position of either accepting fire and rehire contracts or signing off on the cost cutting package offered by Unite shows how hostile the trade unions and Labour Party are to the basic interests of the working class.

Labour MP's, including Rebecca Long-Bailey and Grahame Morris, attended to pay lip service to an industrial dispute, only in order to advance the unions to the major corporations as an alternative means of ensuring profitability at their members' expense.

The alliance of Unite and the Labour Party has been used to prevent any broader mobilising of opposition in the working class and to isolate the strike by Go North West drivers for the past six weeks. This has included efforts to boost false friends such as Labour's pro-business Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, and the Labour-run Manchester City Council.

The council passed a resolution this week stating that it will not enter into contracts with companies which use fire and rehire methods, but this would only be done "in so far as this is legally possible", i.e., not at all. Burnham himself visited the picket line this week in a PR stunt.

Meanwhile the well-prepared strikebreaking operation by Go Ahead against the strike at the Queens Road depot proceeds apace without any sanction from the Labour authority that has regulatory powers over local bus services. Go-Ahead, the largest private bus operator in the UK, has been permitted to subcontract all its 30 routes to around a dozen smaller bus and coach operators and keep them running, having set up a new base at another depot in Greater Manchester.

The appeal by Unite to take action against Go Ahead was given short shrift by Burnham, who instructed the union to go to the arbitration service ACAS and make a deal with the company. Unite focussed all its attention on seeking to get the backing of the company for its £1.3 million cost-cutting agenda during 12 days of negotiations which ended April 1 without agreement.

Those listening in on April 7 could have been forgiven for thinking that the selfish drive to prioritise profit over life that has already resulted in 150,000 preventable deaths nationally and three million globally was not happening. The subordination of public health measures to reopening of the economy prematurely—endorsed by the unions at every stage—has led to new surges of the pandemic and an offensive by the major corporations such as Go Ahead and British Gas to restore their profitability at workers' expense.

The overarching goal of the speakers from Unite and the Labour Party was to conceal their de facto alliance with the Conservative government and the employers.

Opening the meeting Laura Smith, a former Labour MP, reminded everyone that Go North West was part of the "very wealthy and incredibly profitable company"—Go Ahead, seeking to force drivers to work an additional 130 hours unpaid per year leaving them around £2,500 worse off. But she assured the audience that "even the Tory ministers seem to be standing up in Parliament and calling out fire and rehire."

Neil Clarke, Unite Regional Political Officer, outlined the craven pro-company position of the union. He explained that Go Ahead generates £3.8 billion a year from its global operations with £1 billion of this from its bus operations. He then blamed its efforts to ramp up exploitation of its workforce on a "maverick" managing director at the Go North West subsidiary!

Unite did not have an issue with cost reductions, Clarke explained. Only management's ideologically driven attack on workers' rights stood in the way of the union and company working together. Unite, he said, had "offered to resource a root and branch evaluation of the company's financial management on the 5th of August 2020."

"Unite's offer created a serious problem for the employer," he added, "because we've committed to embark on over a million pounds worth of savings for the company, from scheduling and rostering alone. Add to this the fact that they've [Go North West] already reduced their driver population in 2020 by a net 15, so they've already shaved half a million pounds off their salary bill.

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Further changes will see a reduction of a further up to 30 drivers. That will save them a further million pounds. When you add this to the savings that Unite have said they will work with the company to achieve, the company will move from what they consider a loss-making position into a healthy profit-making position."

After listing the £2.5-£3 million savings on offer, Clarke emphasised that Go Ahead and other private operators were assured profit margins of up to 7-9 percent under the new franchising arrangements to be introduced by Burnham in his re-regulation of buses in Greater Manchester.

Colin Hayden, Senior Rep and Branch Chair at the Queens Road depot, related how the union had welcomed the takeover of the garage from First Group by Go Ahead in 2019, disarming workers with claims that it was a responsible employer that would invest in its employees and the city. Instead, the company had served the Section 188 notification to drivers in August last year, as the garage had been hit with a driver's death from Covid-19 and infections were spreading, with many needing to self-isolate.

The response of Unite was to offer concessions to the company in talks leading up to Christmas. Hayden did not explain that the union offered a one year pay freeze and £1 million in cuts. He pleaded to the company, "Just last week we've tabled an offer solely from the drivers that puts a vast amount of money back into the business. The drivers have offered, through the union, to invest in the company, but we need them to invest in us."

Comments and questions were received as to how far the union was prepared to take the dispute, with one striker asking what happens after May 8, the date when drivers will be dismissed for not signing the inferior contract. The response from the platform confirmed that there are no plans to extend or escalate the dispute. This was a campaign pitched exclusively to the government and the corporate boardroom.

A despicable role was performed by Rebecca Long-Bailey, a leading supporter of former left Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. She is among those championing an alliance with arch Tory right-winger Jacob Rees-Mogg on the pretext of his comments that fire and rehire was bad practice, or as Smith claimed, "bad capitalism."

Rees-Mogg's comments in Parliament were addressed to "his good capitalist friends," which he posted on his Twitter account under the caption, "Fire and rehire tactics shame business. Our great capitalist, market economy depends on decency and trust."

Long-Bailey is willing to promote this multi-millionaire scion of privilege and vicious representative of capital as an ally of embattled workers. Rees-Mogg has justified the worst outrages of capitalism against the working class, including the 72 people killed in the Grenfell Fire whom he slandered for not having any common sense.

But according to Long-Bailey he is a reformer in waiting. She stated that it would be so simple if people like Jacob Rees-Mogg, "If he did think that it was wrong, if any other Tory MP did think it was wrong they could make very simple amendments to legislation. All that needs to be done is to amend the employment rights act to provide that it would be unfair to dismiss someone to achieve reduction in their pay, benefits or conditions of employment."

This hollow call for Tory-led reform went hand in glove with an appeal for the corporations to work more closely with the trade unions. Speaking of the situation at Go North West, Long-Bailey stated, "I know that Unite the union had been attempting to negotiate with the company to reach some form of compromise to try and sort this out. They even presented a range of financial proposals. They offered a revised sick pay scheme. They extended the unpaid time during meal breaks as requested by the company which would have impacted on the working hours of bus drivers and they said that they would do that temporarily for a period of two years."

Her comments confirm how far removed the Corbynite "left" is from any perspective associated with class struggle and the working class, or even the most limited reformist redistribution of wealth. Long-Bailey describes as "a compromise" the union offering to cut workers sick pay in the middle of a pandemic and reducing their pay during working hours, even after outlining how Go Ahead has raked in an operating profit of £121 million.

Unite even opposed any linking of the fight at Go North West with the dispute at RATP in London, where it has foisted rotten pay agreements at two of the subsidiaries and left workers at the other—London United—isolated in the fight against the imposition of inferior terms and conditions.

The political line-up at the Unite Facebook event confirms the assessment made of these rotten organisations in the call by the Socialist Equality Party for its online public meeting this Saturday at 2pm to establish a Network of Rank-and-File Committees:

"In every struggle, workers immediately come face-to-face with the role of the trade unions as professional saboteurs and police for corporate management in imposing 'restructurings', cutbacks and dismissals to maintain 'competitiveness'. In the Labour Party they confront a mortal enemy and de facto coalition partner of the Tory government."

The fight for rank-and-file committees is a means of uniting the entire working class to wage an uncompromising fight to defend lives and livelihoods in opposition to capitalism and the accumulation of wealth by the super-rich. Go North West workers seeking a genuine alternative are encouraged to register and attend this vital event.

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