

Once more on bus workers and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union: About that frying pan...

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Last week the *World Socialist Web Site* published an article, “Ex-Unite activists call on London bus drivers to join RMT: From the frying pan, into the frying pan”. We explained that switching unions would solve nothing and that efforts to promote the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union as more “left-wing” and “militant” than Unite were a snow job.

“Whether under “left-wing” or “right-wing” leadership,” we wrote, “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.”

London bus drivers are fully justified in cancelling their membership of Unite. Drivers have left the union in droves over its naked collusion with the bus operators and Transport for London (TfL). Unite’s pro-company actions and partnership with Boris Johnson’s Conservative government and Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan to “keep London moving” during the pandemic, has cost the lives of more than 60 bus workers.

According to former Unite activists such as James Rossi, the RMT is a “proper fighting union”. They argue that if enough drivers join the RMT, the employers will be forced to recognise it and negotiate better pay, conditions and safety.

This is a fairy tale. Last Thursday, RMT General Secretary Mick Cash wrote a letter making clear RMT’s absolute defence of Unite and repudiation of its newfound cheerleaders and their recruitment drive.

“The RMT will not and should not be encouraging or attempting to recruit individuals based at companies where Unite have a sole recognition agreement”, Cash wrote to a former Unite activist on the London buses.

“Unite hold the Collective Bargaining Agreement for a number of bus companies operating in and around the London area and where we receive applications from these workers, we will continue to advise individuals that this is the case.”

Cash’s letter upheld the sanctity of a Collective Bargaining Agreement that has imposed crushing conditions on drivers, including dangerous shift patterns, the introduction of Remote Sign On and zero-hours contracts. He revealed that the Trades Union Congress and Unite had written to the RMT, “regarding the recruitment and poaching of bus workers” and cited the responsibility of “all affiliates of the TUC” to uphold “stable trade union structures”.

He wrote, “I am therefore instructing you to cease undertaking any further recruitment activity, or activities which could be perceived as encouraging colleagues working at Unite covered bus garages to join

the RMT.”

Cash’s letter exposes the absurd tributes to the RMT and the laughable claims by RMT leadership contender Steve Hedley that his union is “socialist, anti-capitalist and anti-establishment”. The RMT upholds the corporatist framework of union recognition introduced by the Tory government in 1992 and is hostile to any challenge from the rank-and-file.

Although the right to form a trade union is recognised in Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 11 of the European Court of Human Rights, workers in Britain have no automatic right to establish a trade union. Under the Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act (1992), where employers and unions have failed to reach agreement on “voluntary recognition” the state decides whether to accept or reject applications. A Central Arbitration Committee (CAC)—a UK government body—decides which unions will be recognised to negotiate with employers on terms, conditions and pay.

The CAC’s most recent chairman, Stephen Redmond, was appointed by Tory Business Minister Margot James in 2017. CAC guidelines explain, “CAC Chairman, Mr Stephen Redmond, appoints a panel of 3 people to decide each application. Each panel consists of a Deputy Chair, one Employer Member and one Worker Member. Appointments to the CAC are made by the Secretary of State for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy.”

Among the employer appointees is David Cadger, HR Director at Serco Group, Kieran Grimshaw, former HR Director at easyJet, and Tom Keeney, Employee Relations Director at BT Group. The “worker” appointees include Ian Hanson (retired), former chair of the Greater Manchester Police Federation, Paul Noon OBE, former General Secretary of the Prospect union, and Steve Gillan, General Secretary of the Prison Officers Association and a member of the TUC General Council.

The TUC’s commitment to state control of trade unions is enshrined in its Disputes Principles and Procedures. Its rule book cites Schedule 1 of the Employment Relations Act 1999 upholding the powers of the CAC and of the TUC’s role in the recognition process. The CAC has the power to de-recognise trade unions, with Home Secretary Priti Patel also able to veto applications. The state has had little cause to exercise such powers in view of the trade unions’ central role in suppressing strikes over the past three and half decades.

Efforts to promote the RMT are a hopeless political improvisation. Just this past week, the RMT finalised its betrayal of the four-year struggle by rail drivers and conductors against Driver Only Operated

(DOO) trains. RMT officials agreed with South Western Railway executives to downgrade the safety-critical role of conductors in opening and closing train doors, relegating this role to the driver and jeopardising passenger safety.

Faced with such a shabby record, Rossi and his RMT fan club have resorted to censorship against the WSW. After the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee's Miles Driver posted a link to the WSW article on Rossi's Facebook group, "We the London Bus Drivers Want Change Now!!", the post was rejected by administrators.

Miles replied with a message to Rossi explaining, "The purpose of the WSW article is to try and clarify some fundamental issues facing bus workers" asking, "Has my post been declined accidentally?"

Rossi replied with a voicemail message confirming he had blocked the article because of its exposure of the RMT. He falsely claimed that WSW had described the RMT as "racist", before stating his agreement with the RMT's nationalist campaign against foreign ownership of British railways. Pointing to Arriva's ownership by German company Deutsche Bahn, Rossi stated, "All those companies do is take the profits out of the country... all the money went to Germany".

There is an objective connection between Rossi's nationalist politics and his attempts to suppress the WSW and the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

At its heart, economic nationalism is an attempt to subordinate the working class to the profit interests of the national capitalist class. Rossi and the RMT denounce foreign ownership, choosing to ignore the brutal slashing of workers' wages and conditions by British companies. British headquartered Go Ahead runs 70 percent of bus routes in the UK and its train franchises include Govia Thameslink Railway, Southeastern and London Midland. It is listed on the London Stock Exchange with revenue of £3.8 billion. Is Rossi suggesting the profits made by UK companies "trickle down" to workers, as promised by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan 40 years ago?

It is an axiom of Marxism that the working class is an international class whose unity must be consciously fought for by socialists against all forms of nationalism and racism.

Seeking to block any discussion among bus workers on these issues, Rossi and his supporters have resorted to censorship and lies about the WSW and the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee. After another driver posted a copy of our article on Rossi's Facebook group, Rossi replied, "WSWC [sic] want all unions abolished".

He was backed by Gerry Downing, a notorious pseudo-left apologist for the union bureaucracy, who claimed WSW was "scabby" for describing today's trade unions as part of corporate management, adding, "Abolishing trade unions is what a fascist government would do".

Downing attacked the formation of rank-and-file committees of bus drivers, independent of the unions, writing, "do form militant trade unions but WITHIN the unions, not outside."

Downing is utterly hostile to any movement of workers independent of the bureaucracy. Any genuine rank-and-file committee developing within the trade unions would *immediately* collide with the union's corporatist arrangements with the employers and the state, leading to the expulsion and the victimisation of its members. Indeed, last year Unite suspended some of its own health and safety reps for daring to criticise lead official for buses, John Murphy.

It should be noted in this regard that Rossi and his fellow activists' promotion of the RMT is not their first fool's errand. Only four months ago, he was reverse-peddling on a petition he launched calling

for the resignation of Murphy. After Murphy agreed to attend a ZOOM meeting, Rossi promptly capitulated, declaring, "This is not the time to leave the union". "It's good that John's coming", he stated, so "let's all be civil, respectful and polite".

It is the responsibility of Marxists to encourage forms of organisation that facilitate the struggle of the working class, not retard it by promoting illusions in corporatist trade unions.

In 1937, Leon Trotsky—co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution—discussed the scientific criteria employed by Marxists in reaching a definition of the trade unions. He wrote, "The character of a workers' organization such as a trade union is determined by its relation to the distribution of national income. The fact that Green and Company [anti-communist leaders of the American Federation of Labour] defend private property in the means of production characterizes them as bourgeois. Should these gentlemen in addition defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed; then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union."

In the above case cited by Trotsky, the American trade unions still functioned as defence organisations for workers, despite their pro-capitalist leadership. Today's trade unions have been transformed into appendages of the state and corporate management, dedicated to policing their own members and suppressing the class struggle—redistributing wealth away from the working class into the coffers of a parasitic financial oligarchy. Where strikes do break out, such as those at Manchester Go North West and RATP Dev in London, or against DOO, the unions work to isolate and wear them down, pledging concessions at the direct expense of pay, terms and conditions.

In his 1940 essay, "Marxism and the Trade Unions", Trotsky analysed the corporatist development of the trade unions, defined as "their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power".

Corporatism developed on the basis of imperialism—the final stage of capitalism—that saw free trade supplanted by monopolies, trade war and military conflict, shattering the basis for reforms, and requiring the suppression of the working class and all forms of democracy. Trotsky observed, "By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism".

It is these objective processes, rooted in the development of capitalism, that make necessary rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions. Such committees have vast potential to unite workers across key sectors and across national borders against capitalism and for the socialist reorganisation of world economy.

We urge bus and transport workers who agree with this perspective to get in touch and join the committee.



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