

UK: Fire and rehire contract deadline nears for striking Go North West bus drivers

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The strike by over 400 Manchester bus drivers against fire and rehire contracts being imposed by Go North West has reached its eleventh hour, with just over a week until the deadline for mass dismissal on May 8.

The strike action, which has entered its eighth week, is one of the longest disputes for over a generation on the national bus network. It testifies to the determination of workers to withstand a vicious assault on their terms and conditions imposed by dictatorial methods. The outcome of this fight will have repercussions for bus workers and the entire working class. Go-Ahead, the parent company of Go North West, is establishing a new benchmark of exploitation at the Cheetham Hill depot including a 10 percent wage cut.

Faced with this assault, Unite the union has isolated the dispute based on pleas directed to the company to lift the fire and rehire contracts and accept its own proposed £1.3 million in cuts. The only alternative is the fight to establish a rank-and-file committee to take the dispute out of the hands of Unite and turn to the working class, in a fight against the Johnson government and its accomplices in the Labour Party and trade unions.

Unite offers nothing but an alternative mechanism to impose a new round of attacks on bus drivers at Go North West. Its aim is to secure its own role as a trusted partner of the company in demobilising opposition, implementing pay restraint and destroying terms and conditions.

The prostration of Unite has enabled the company to press ahead with its mass firing ultimatum. Go-Ahead has been able to organise an armada of smaller contractors to operate its routes without any attempt by Unite to shut down its operations launched from an

alternative depot in the region.

The experience of the British Gas dispute provides an object lesson regarding the betrayal of the fight against fire and rehire by the trade unions.

Around 7,000 British Gas engineers took over 40 days of strike action against a 15 percent pay cut, which was betrayed by the GMB union. The dispute began in January with the contracts being burned by striking workers, but ended on April 14 with the GMB enforcing the signing of the contracts and allowing around 500 strikers who refused to sign to be fired. Unite, Unison and Prospect had already signed up to the restructuring terms demanded by British Gas without a murmur.

Unite with a membership of 1.4 million and the GMB with over 600,000 are the largest and third largest unions in the UK. However, the two largest corporations in their sector, British Gas, in energy and Go-Ahead in transport, have been able to rely on them not to lift a finger to mobilise their wider membership.

The April 26 launch of Unite's national campaign against fire and rehire contracts is an exercise in smoke and mirrors. The national day of action to supposedly begin coordinated strike action demonstrated how threadbare this pretence is. Along with Go North West, it centred on a dispute at Goodlord lettings involving staff in London and Fife council in Scotland. The dispute at Goodlord London involves just 20 Unite members opposing a pay cut of £6,000, with Unite providing no details of the strike at Fife.

This is in the context of Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey describing fire and rehire as a "disease that's ripping through our workplaces" and a Trades Union Congress report that one in 10 workers have faced the same ultimatum since the start of the pandemic.

Unite is in fact suppressing strikes. On Sunday, Unite suspended strike action due to begin Monday by hundreds of drivers at seven bus garages at the London United subsidiary of RATP in a dispute which developed a week before the indefinite strike at Go North West.

Unite will not even co-ordinate strike action within a single company. The rolling strikes over pay, zero-hour contracts and removal of entitlements across all three London subsidiaries of RATP by 2,000 bus drivers were treated as separate disputes. At London Sovereign and Quality Line, the “improved” pay offer Unite foisted on strikers to end the dispute was effectively a pay cut. Unite suspended the strike at London United on Sunday to consider the latest revised offer, the details of which have not been released publicly.

At Metroline, which employs 16 percent of bus drivers in London, Unite continues to sit on a 97 percent strike mandate against Remote Sign On (RSO) by 4,000 bus drivers. Weeks after the ballot result on April 9, Unite has announced that strike dates are to remain “under wraps” until May 10. The union already reneged on a 97 percent strike mandate last November after the company threatened legal action.

Unite is opposed to any struggle that would cut across attempts to present Greater Manchester’s Labour Mayor Andy Burnham and London Mayor Sadiq Khan as saviours of embattled workers. The union is using the fact that they are up for re-election in the May 6 local elections to hold them to empty promises to outlaw private operators from tendering for bus routes. Unite has even gone to the lengths of producing banners with Burnham’s face on them—after he appeared on the Go North West picket line for a photo op—with the statement, “Action not Words: Support Keyworkers, No Fire and Rehire”.

Unite has declared that it has a £40 million strike fund from which it is paying £70 a day strike pay to Go North West strikers. The union could easily employ these funds to mobilise strike action across Go -Ahead nationally and bus drivers at other companies in Manchester.

What is at stake is widely recognised by other workers. As one Stagecoach driver at the Hyde Road depot in Manchester told a WSWs reporting team, 'Andy Burnham should not be allowing the scab buses to run the routes of the striking bus workers... If Queens

Road lose then the restructuring of contracts would happen to all bus drivers.'

The unions will not challenge the laws against secondary strike action because they conceal their own hostility to solidarity action and efforts to divide and police the working class on behalf of the corporations and government. When the trade unions have been unable to prevent strike action, their role is to neuter opposition while seeking to convince corporate management to retain their services in preventing an eruption of the class struggle.

In the past week alone, Unite has lobbied key Go-Ahead investors at Go Compare, Vanguard Group and West Yorkshire Pension Group. Its message is the same; by imposing fire and rehire the company has provoked militant opposition that undermines the profitability of the company and its corporate reputation.

Unite has also released a video, “End fire and rehire”, like the GMB’s videos over British Gas, promoting the fraud that the Conservative government is opposed to fire and rehire. Unite’s video went so far as to include footage of arch Tory right-winger Jacob Rees-Mogg complaining of the misuse of “fire and rehire” contracts, and of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, politely urging him to pass legislation outlawing the practice.

While the unions speak about standing up for “key workers”, they urge their members to throw themselves on the mercy of major corporations and the political parties that do their bidding, whether Tory or Labour.

The struggles confronting the working class pose the necessity of organising independently of the pro-company unions through the establishment of rank-and-file committees to mobilise the entire working class against the existing economic and social order. This task confronts the working class on an international level. We urge all workers to attend the May Day rally organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International and support the initiative to establish the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees .



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