

UK: Unite union claims victory is imminent after Go North West buses withdraws fire and rehire threat

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Striking bus drivers in Manchester, England were told Friday that Go North West has withdrawn its threat to impose fire and rehire contracts, just one week before the deadline of May 8 to sign or face mass dismissals.

Pickets at the Queens Road depot were provided with champagne to celebrate after nine weeks of strike action by 400 drivers against a threatened 10 percent pay cut of up to £2,500 a year and a reduction in sick pay of 67 percent by Go-Ahead, parent company of Go North West.

But bus workers should beware of union bureaucrats claiming imminent victory!

Unite has conducted negotiations behind their backs, with no details released of the terms of the new agreement being sought by the company in return for reportedly withdrawing its threat. The union is still in internal discussions over how to present the documents it has received from Go Ahead as the basis of an agreement to be put to the membership.

At an online meeting of Solidarity Shouts group—self-described as a “Unite activists network”—on Friday evening, Unite Senior Rep at Go North West, Colin Hayden, announced to much fanfare that the fire and rehire contracts had been torn up. But he said nothing about the revised terms being offered, other than admitting they were inferior.

“Our conditions are not the same as what they were, however, they are not what they were in the fire and rehire contracts,” he said, before emphasising, “We have managed to get the CEO to the table.”

Unite has stressed throughout the dispute that the fire and rehire threat was unnecessarily confrontational and that cuts should instead be imposed by the union bureaucracy through normal channels. An indication of

the rotten deal being discussed is the fact that Unite previously offered £1.3 million pounds worth of cuts during arbitration talks with the company in March. Go North West refused that offer, indicating that Unite is now discussing still more savage attacks.

At a recent online meeting held by Unite, supposedly to organise solidarity with Go North West, pro-Jeremy Corbyn Labour MP for Salford and Eccles, Rebecca Long-Bailey, stated approvingly, “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.”

After taking 60 days of strike action, it is clear that Unite is trying to bounce Go North West bus drivers into accepting still greater attacks.

Unite acts as a police force over its members on behalf of management. It was reluctantly forced to call action at Queens Road depot, only to insist that the issue at stake was the union’s right to continue to negotiate away hard-won terms and conditions. Meanwhile Unite did everything possible to isolate the dispute and oppose any spread to other garages.

A union with a transport membership of 95,000 spread across 150 companies has not mobilised a single bus worker at any other garage in Manchester or nationally in support of Go North West strikers. This allowed Go-Ahead to run a massive strike breaking operation from an alternative depot in Greater

Manchester.

Meanwhile in London, Unite has sabotaged strikes at RATP against low pay and zero-hour contracts and is suppressing a 97 percent mandate for strike action at Metroline against Remote Sign On (RSO). Taken collectively this constitutes a third of all bus drivers employed in the capital.

Any genuine mobilisation of bus drivers behind the Go North West strike would have cut across the union's orientation to the Go-Ahead boardroom, its investors and Boris Johnson's Conservative government, to whom Unite has promised itself as a guarantor of continued profitability.

Fire and rehire contracts have become a favoured weapon in a frontal assault on the working class. The attempt to present unionised workplaces as a bedrock for opposing this is being completely exposed during the two longest running disputes over this question, Go North West and British Gas.

At British Gas, the GMB union collaborated in imposing the fire and rehire contracts after over 40 days of strike action by around 7,000 engineers by telling strikers they had to sign by the April 14 deadline. This allowed an estimated 500 workers who defied the ultimatum to be dismissed.

Go North West is not the first time Unite has demobilised the fight against fire and rehire. At SPS Technologies in Leicester, which supplies parts to the aerospace industry, around 200 Unite members staged more than 10 days of strike action during March and April against fire and rehire contracts. The contracts included reductions in overtime pay, sick pay, paid breaks and shift premiums and amounted to £3,000 a year wage cut. Unite suspended the strike in April after the company scrapped the fire and rehire policy in exchange for the union ramming through revised terms and conditions that imposed at least half the cuts originally demanded. More will almost certainly follow.

This was the last victory proclaimed by Unite. The union sent its members back to work with Unite Regional Officer, Lakhy Mahal, commenting, "Their strength and solidarity has resulted in a deal that protects their incomes and that allows them to return to work with their heads held high."

The only incomes protected by Unite are those of SPS Technologies owners and shareholders. Unite had

pointed to the fact that the company is owned by Warren Buffett's multinational conglomerate, Berkshire Hathaway. Buffett became the sixth richest man in the world, with his personal wealth hitting \$100 billion the same month as the dispute began, and with the conglomerate's stock price soaring by 34 percent during the pandemic.

The faux outrage of the unions over the disgraceful treatment of workers and obscene profiteering is a tap to be turned on and off. It ends when they are included as junior partners with the companies.

Any opposition to a sellout deal at Go North West requires a reorientation of the dispute. This begins by taking it out of the hands of Unite and turning to the working class through the building and development of rank-and-file committees across the sectional divides maintained by the union.

Workers need genuine defensive organisations of struggle, which are answerable to them, not trade unions who are beholden to the companies and their profit drive.

The demand must be: No compromise with Go North West's cuts! Workers lives and their rights and terms are non-negotiable. The unions use the term "key worker" only to dull class consciousness and imply that workers and the companies are striving to achieve common goals. But it underlines an essential political truth—that the working class is the sole producer of wealth and without it society does not function.

The pandemic has provided terrible proof on a world-wide basis that the basic needs of society are incompatible with the drive by capitalism to maximise profits. As with every major problem which confronts society today—social inequality, the attack on democratic rights and the danger of war—the solution is only to be found in the unified and co-ordinated response of the international working class. This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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