

UK: Claim of strike “victory” at Go North West unravels as Unite refuses to disclose its rotten deal

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11 May 2021

Almost two weeks after the Unite union told 400 striking bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester that they had secured a victory against the imposition of savage attacks through a “fire and rehire” contract, the rotten deal negotiated is being kept secret.

On Friday April 30, bottles of sparkling wine were handed round by pickets at the Queens Road depot in Cheetham Hill to celebrate after officials said the threat of fire and rehire was being “taken off the table” —barely a week before the May 8 deadline to dismiss anyone refusing to accept a £2,500 pay cut and an inferior sick pay scheme.

Colin Hayden, Unite’s senior steward at Go North West, told an online meeting that evening that the CEO of parent company Go Ahead had agreed to withdraw the fire and rehire threat, adding that “our conditions are not the same as what they were, however, they are not what were in the fire and rehire contract.” The proposed agreement was being looked over, but “we’ve got a negotiated contract we are working on, negotiated sick pay, negotiated scheduling and rostering agreement and negotiated holiday and sickness absence policy.”

In an online May Day event the next day, Manchester Trades Union Council (MTUC) industrial action co-ordinator Ian Allinson claimed that “Go Ahead has made an offer which sounds as if it could be an important victory.” Union reps were “still looking at it in detail... but if all goes to plan it seems likely workers will vote on an offer this week.”

Allinson, a member of the RS21 split off from the Socialist Workers Party, held an executive position in Unite for 10 years up until 2014 and launched an unsuccessful bid to become general secretary in 2016.

In his position as “industrial action co-ordinator” for the MTUC, he has ensured that not a single bus or transport worker has been mobilised in support of the Go North West dispute.

Allinson presented an upcoming May Day march and rally in Manchester on May 3 as a prelude to “a great victory that will really set back fire and rehire and move us towards a situation where that can be banned in Britain as it is in so many other countries.”

The refusal to outline the deal and organise a ballot can only mean that what is being proposed is so toxic that Unite is working frantically on how to sell it to the Go North West drivers and to prevent an angry backlash.

On May 10, Allinson signed an email from the MTUC stating, “Despite tantalising progress which included forcing the withdrawal of fire and rehire, the Unite reps are still negotiating with local management to get a written offer which can be put to members. The strike continues to keep up the pressure for a deal.”

A solidarity rally was announced for Thursday May 13 outside Go North West’s Queen’s Road depot in north Manchester.

Allinson noted that strikers “are nearing the end of the 12-week period of maximum legal protection. On Thursday they will get the result of a second ballot and (if there is no deal by then) Unite is expected to issue a new notice of action to trigger a second 12-week protected period from 27 May.”

Yet in an article in the *Manchester Evening News* dated May 8, Go North West stated, “Following negotiations, an agreement has been struck between Go North West and Unite to resolve this dispute. The agreement is due to be put to a vote of Unite members.”

In a letter to staff, Go North West Managing Director Nigel Featham provides an account of an intensive summit meeting “lasting two days in London, at which Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey was present. Featham reports, “A formal agreement was duly signed by General Secretary Len McCluskey and Go Ahead CE David Brown, confirming the elements of the deal, the end of trade union leverage at Queens Road, the cancellation of the second strike ballot, and an undertaking by Unite to conduct a ballot on the deal with a recommendation to its members to accept.”

As regards the role of Unite’s reps in Manchester, Featham states, “The timetable for implementation is now in the hands of Unite’s local representatives, and we expect to be moving forward with all due speed within days.”

To sum up, according to Allinson and the MTUC, Unite’s local officials are deep in negotiations with Go North West and threatening continued strike action. According to Go North West, Unite’s national leadership has already signed a deal with its Go Ahead parent and agreed to recommend it to its members. The only role for local officials is to decide a timetable for implementation.

Someone is lying through their teeth, and on this occasion, until McCluskey issues a formal denial, it is most likely not Go Ahead management but the trades council and the local reps.

Throughout the dispute, various pseudo-left groups have assumed their customary role as apologists for the trade union bureaucracy. But even as they try and claim a victory on Unite’s behalf, their reports indicate that a betrayal is on the cards.

Socialist Alternative wrote April 30 that “The juggernaut of fire and rehire has been dealt a colossal blow” at Go Ahead, but then added, “There is much which is unclear at the time of writing and which drivers will want to examine closely, potentially sick pay and rotas.”

A May 5 *Socialist Appeal* article by a “Manchester Unite the union member” also acknowledged, “It is understood that the union has agreed to accept some cost-saving measures. These are likely to affect break times and sick pay.”

An article by Allinson published on the RS21 website, “Ongoing Manchester bus strike defeats fire and rehire”, notes the union’s “concession bargaining”

approach based upon Unite “accepting cuts to pay and conditions” to help Go North West remain “competitive”. Earlier reports of the concessions offered by Unite include inferior terms and conditions and cost cutting proposals of £1.3 million. Allinson makes clear that “these are included in the deal. In some cases Unite had only offered them as temporary concessions for a two-year period. But GoNW [Go North West] has not guaranteed to restore the terms.”

Allinson and the entire pseudo-left cabal are loyal adjuncts of the trade union apparatus, with many holding lucrative posts within its ranks, who act as frontline enforcers shutting down any independent struggle by workers and imposing the dictates of the corporations and their bureaucratic servants.

The warning made by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) in its last article has been vindicated: “bus workers should beware of union bureaucrats claiming imminent victory!”

Since the start of the dispute, Colin Hayden and other union representatives have done everything in their power to intimidate strikers and prevent them speaking to WSWS reporters and reading its coverage, claiming that the WSWS is “anti-union.” The bitter truth is that Unite and its counterparts are trade unions in name only, acting rather as an industrial police force against its own members on behalf of corporate management.

Unite already has a list of betrayals behind it over fire and rehire. If Go Ahead is not to be added to this roster of treachery, bus drivers must draw the necessary lessons, break from the pro-capitalist trade unions and form a rank-and-file committee—a genuine democratic organ of class struggle, upholding the interests of workers and not the profits of Go Ahead. Such a rank and file committee must appeal to other bus and transport workers for solidarity action and not to shareholders, false friends in the Labour Party like Mayor Andy Burnham and the Conservative government to legislate against fire and rehire.



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