

Unite's sell-out pay deal at London United fuels anger among bus drivers

Laura Tiernan
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Unite the union ended industrial action by hundreds of bus drivers at London United last Thursday, after narrowly pushing through a rotten pay deal reached with transport giant RATP.

Described by Unite as an “improved pay offer” and a “positive development”, the deal will see a 2.25 percent rise over 2 years and a one-off payment of £400. This is an effective pay cut. Drivers at London United have not received a pay increase for two years, with inflation running at 1 percent in 2020, and inflation fears growing.

The company's one-off “bonus” payment is an insult. Despite risking their lives during the coronavirus pandemic, drivers' pay was severely curtailed after they were placed on Sunday rosters. Others lost income due to insufficient sick pay after catching the virus. More than 60 London bus workers have died from COVID-19 in the past year.

Drivers' disgust toward the union-company deal was shown in the ballot results: 639 voted against Unite's recommendation, with 696 in favour. At Park Royal, Stamford Brook and Shepherds Bush an overwhelming majority of drivers rejected the deal.

Unite promptly issued a statement announcing that all industrial action was cancelled.

Strikes at RATP's three subsidiaries—London United, London Sovereign and Quality Line—began on February 22, with drivers demanding improved pay and the defeat of company plans to end guaranteed minimum hours per day and the introduction of zero hours contracts. RATP's agenda was part of London-wide plans for Remote Sign On (RSO) and full shift “flexibility” by all the bus companies.

Regional Officer Michelle Braveboy declared at the start of the dispute that Unite was drawing a “line in the sand”, but the union worked to suppress any genuine fight. Drivers were divided, with strike action staggered across alternate days on a company-by-company basis.

Unite accepted that different pay rates would be offered at each subsidiary, repudiating the principle of equal pay for equal work. At Quality Line, drivers earned £2.50 an hour less for doing the same job as their colleagues at RATP—but following the dispute that pay gap has only widened.

Drivers at all three subsidiaries gave solid backing to the strikes, with a large turnout on pickets. The sentiment was summed up by a Park Royal driver who told WSWs reporters, “This is just the spark of a broader fight”.

Unite did nothing to mobilise support among London's 25,000 bus drivers, not even after Metrolink ran additional services to try and break the strike.

Unite's divide and rule tactics were repeated in Manchester, where 400 bus drivers on strike since February against fire and rehire threats—including annual pay cuts of £2,500 and reduced sick pay entitlements—were left to fight alone while they have offered the company “concessions” including £1.3 million in cuts.

In London, Braveboy's “line in the sand” proved a mirage. Unite repeatedly suspended strike action to force through pay agreements reached with RATP executives. At Quality Line, Braveboy pushed through a miserly 1 percent increase—17 pence extra an hour. At London Sovereign, drivers rejected that offer, but Unite came back, balloting drivers on a wretched 1.25 percent “uplift”. The revised offer was accepted, but one third of drivers voted against.

The massive “no” vote registered at Park Royal, Stamford Brook and Shepherds Bush speaks to a growing mood of opposition among London bus drivers toward Unite's record of collusion with the private operators, Transport for London and Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan.

Last Thursday, Braveboy declared, “It is hoped that this deal will mark a new start in industrial relations with

RATP”. This must serve as a warning to drivers. Unite plans to deepen its partnership with RATP and the major transport companies under conditions of a new global assault on the working class.

Unite promotes nationalist division

The sharpest expression of Unite’s pro-capitalist agenda during the RATP strike was its filthy nationalist advertisement displayed in the mass-circulation *Metro* newspaper: “OOH LA, C’est Incroyable! French bus drivers are treated better than London bus drivers”.

“Over the Channel, in Paris,” the advertisement continues, “our fellow drivers are better paid and better cared for. We just want the same for London drivers. In the UK we value fair play and fair pay.”

This is indeed “incroyable!”, and totally untrue. At the time these words were written, the second wave of the pandemic was overwhelming French hospitals, with key workers being infected with COVID-19 in record numbers.

On February 15, RATP removed plexiglass protection for bus drivers in Paris, forcing a return to front door fare payment. The unions organised a single day of action against this, before telling workers to put their faith in a judicial appeal. Two months later, on April 15, the court upheld RATP’s removal of screens for a three-month period, pending an internal “review”. On April 16, BFMTV news reported that 307 bus drivers had been infected with the virus in March alone. Olivier Davoise, the CGT’s bus network delegate, said the number of contaminated bus drivers had tripled since the removal of the screens.

Unite’s claim that UK companies “value fair play and fair pay” is also a nationalist fairy tale. Go-Ahead, First, and countless other UK-based transport companies preside over ruthless levels of exploitation. Unite’s advertisement was part of efforts to divide the working class, block the development of international solidarity action, and facilitated Unite’s corporatist appeal to work with RATP management in the “national interest”.

SWP: apologists for Unite

The growing opposition of drivers toward Unite is the subject of nervousness among Britain’s pseudo-left groups, who are acutely sensitive to any challenge by workers to the Labour and trade union apparatus.

On Tuesday, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) published an article headlined, “Bus drivers angry after strikes end in let down over pay”. It cited the caustic remarks of drivers at Park Royal garage who denounced Unite’s actions and their sell-out deal, “most drivers have lost all faith in our union” reports one driver, while another says, “we all feel let down by our union.”

Britain’s pseudo-left tendencies rarely admit to any conflict between workers and the pro-company trade unions. But faced with the workers’ angry attacks on Unite, the SWP was forced to acknowledge reality, with reporter Sam Orr writing, “Socialist Worker learnt of critical moments where the Unite union’s half-hearted actions let drivers down.”

Faced with this “revelation”, Orr concludes his piece with the injunction that workers must “learn the lessons of this dispute”. But this amounts only to the invocation that “More militant actions can achieve the demands that bus drivers deserve.”

Responsibility for Unite’s rotten pay deals, according to the SWP, rests firmly with the workers themselves: “London Sovereign drivers accepted a poor offer of a tiny pay rise of just 0.25 percent and Quality Line drivers accepted a 0.5 percent offer. The longer strike at London United garages forced a better offer than other RATP subsidiaries but that still wasn’t good enough.”

The SWP’s depiction is politically libellous. Workers were determined to fight at all three subsidiaries, but they confronted a union apparatus working on behalf of the companies, Transport for London and the Johnson government.

The real lesson of the RATP dispute is the need for a complete political and organisational break with the corporatist trade unions and the construction of new mass organisations of struggle based on the fight for socialism. We urge all bus workers who agree with this to join and build the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and the Socialist Equality Party.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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