

Unite pushes through betrayal of Go North West strike

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Unite the union has ended the dispute at Go North West in Manchester, based upon a settlement that sacrifices the terms and conditions of the 400 bus drivers who have waged 11 weeks of indefinite strike action against the company and its “fire and rehire” policy.

In a press release Monday, the union stated that the agreement had been accepted by bus drivers after a mass meeting and vote was held that day at the Queens Road depot in Cheetham Hill.

Unite and General Secretary Len McCluskey claim that the agreement is a “huge victory” because parent company Go-Ahead withdrew its threat to “fire and rehire” workers to impose an inferior contract, and supposedly would not use this tactic in future. In reality, the agreement makes clear that “fire and rehire” was not necessary for the company to get what it wanted. Unite has proved itself to be the ideal vehicle for imposing the destruction of terms and conditions demanded by the largest private bus operator in the UK on its members while policing workers’ opposition.

Unite has not released any of the contents of the agreement publicly, which it asserts “will safeguard pay and conditions for thousands of employees across the Go Ahead Group.”

This has left responsibility for providing a public rationale for Unite’s betrayal to the pseudo-left groups. After the capitulation by the GMB union at British Gas, they all flocked to the Go North West dispute as proof that the trade unions could be relied on to defeat fire and rehire. Once a sell-out was in preparation, however, a deathly silence descended.

The Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have written nothing on Go North West over the past fortnight. The last word from the SWP was three brief lines on May 3 as part of a round-up article

stating, “There are rumours of a deal, but there are no details at present.”

The last article from the SP on May 5 quoted from Unite’s senior steward at Go North West, Colin Hayden, at a May Day rally announcing that fire and rehire had been withdrawn and a deal had been put by Go-Ahead in which he stated, “But the deal is not done yet. We will return to work if and when our members vote for the deal. Until then we will be on strike.”

This has left Ian Allinson, a member of the RS21 group and industrial action co-ordinator for the local Manchester Trades Union Council (MTUC), to act as the mouthpiece for Unite thanks to his relations with the local representatives of the bureaucracy. On Monday, Allinson posted a comment on the agreement, with a link to Unite’s press release, on the Facebook page of Manchester Left-Wing Forum.

In it he stated, “There is never shame in making concessions when you’ve put up a real fight. But we should learn from the strike too.”

This is a contemptible attempt to shift the responsibility for the sell-out onto bus drivers who have stood up to Go North West. The shame of betrayal belongs solely to Unite, from McCluskey through to its local reps, and to pathetic apologists such as himself.

Allinson offers the warning that “there will be battles to come when workers return, and potentially big battles in two years time when bus franchising finally arrives,” but claims that when this day comes “Unite has pledged to help strikers claw back the concessions” it has agreed! Translated from his double-speak, this means, “Accept the sell-out and do nothing to rock the boat and disturb Unite’s cosy relationship with Go North West until 2023!”

Even now the agreement reached has not been made public, so we must rely on Allinson, who has seen it, to

hint at what it contains. Listing the deal's "positives", Allinson cites, "Winning back nearly all their sick pay"! In other words, while the company originally demanded a reduction by 67 percent, Unite has conceded that the sick pay scheme must be revised and workers entitlements cut. He then lists as negatives, "Unpaid meals breaks, A longer working day, leading to job losses, Compulsory overtime if a bus runs late."

These concessions, admitted to by a stooge for Unite, are massive. But when all is known they will prove to be only a pale reflection of what has been agreed. On January 25, as Unite finally authorised a strike ballot, it revealed that in negotiations with Go North West, "The union proposed a million pounds worth of savings and in addition a further saving of £200,000 as a result of accepting a year long pay freeze for the workers based at the Queens Road Depot."

McCluskey declares in the Unite press release that the outcome of the dispute at Go North West proves "Once again, the best defence for working people in this country is their union." The real record of the strike confirms the opposite—that Unite and its various counterparts are unions in name only, dedicated solely to protecting the profits of the corporations amassed through the brutal exploitation and immense suffering they impose on the working class.

Go North West has now been added to this roster of betrayals at British Airways and SPS Technologies, where fire and rehire was withdrawn after the union re-established its role as enforcer of the destruction of workers' terms and conditions. The ongoing disputes at Goodlord and Jacob Douwe Egberts face the same danger if Unite maintains its grip.

Go North West will not stand on ceremony for the next two years before imposing fresh attacks on bus drivers, who will be pitched into struggle against the union apparatus like bus workers up and down the country. They will have to sweep aside the corrupt, pro-capitalist trade union apparatus through the formation of and rank and file committees. This is the perspective fought for by the SEP and WSWs.



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