

Unite betrays Metroline London bus drivers' fight against Remote Sign On and calls it a victory

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Unite the union has reneged on the struggle to end Remote Sign On (RSO) at Metroline buses in London, on the pretext of an agreement that its further roll out has been paused until the end of December 2022.

Metroline employs 16 percent of bus workers in the capital and is owned by Singapore-based transnational ComfortDelGro. On April 9, a vote for strike action against RSO secured a massive majority of 96 percent at Metroline West and 97 percent at Metroline Travel, of 4,000 drivers balloted.

Two days of strikes were due this week, starting on May 25, with a further three days of action due to commence from June 7. Unite instead entered further talks with the company and presented the shabby agreement reached as a victory.

This is the climax of the union's efforts to suppress industrial action to protect its relationship with the company, stretching back to August last year. A consultative strike ballot returned a mandate of 99 percent in favour and a strike ballot in October a 97 percent majority. Action was called off by Unite after Metroline threatened legal action.

RSO requires drivers to meet their buses at locations away from the garage and means they are not paid for travelling time—leading to an estimated immediate pay loss of up to 7 percent. It is designed to facilitate greater competition between rival private operators to win routes through the franchising process, as they can bid for contracts away from the garages where they are based.

Unite delayed naming strike dates for weeks and then set a May 10 deadline for an announcement, to ensure that no action went ahead during the campaign for the May 8 local and Mayoral elections. This would have

cut across the union's support for Labour London Mayor Sadiq Khan. Since the start of the pandemic, Unite has established a corporatist Tripartite Agreement with the mayor and Transport for London (TfL), which oversees the franchising process with the private operators. This has ensured that drivers, as key workers, have been kept on the job and given the private operators free license to flout Covid protocols and use the crisis to attack pay and conditions.

Deaths from Covid-19 among London bus drivers are three times the national average. Those furloughed suffered a 20 percent loss of wages as the company refused to top up the government subsidy paid to the corporations. Metroline was allowed to waive its contractual obligations when it implemented Sunday rosters last year, with drivers paid weekday rates for weekend working.

In March, Khan announced a moratorium on RSO which only agreed to review the process and report its findings. On March 17, Managing Director of Metroline Stephen Harris said of the announcement, "In the spirit of fairness and to allow the report to be compiled without any external influences I have decided to pause the introduction of MR/RSO until the outcome of that report..." The company would consider the report as it moved forward with RSO, having incorporated comments from Unite.

Unite portrayed its decision to proceed with the strike ballot as a means of backing Khan and applying further pressure on Metroline. In her letter to members, Unite Regional Officer Mary Summers stated, "Mayor Sadiq Khan has instructed the bosses at Transport for London (TfL) to introduce an immediate moratorium which will not be lifted until detailed research into 'remote

sign on' is completed. However, Metroline has stated it is only pausing the introduction of 'remote sign on'. Our door was open for a constructive dialogue with Metroline to resolve this dispute before strike action began. But Metroline failed to take the opportunity to confirm that remote sign on will not be implemented."

On May 19, Unite declared a victory. Summers told members, "We are very pleased to report that in the lead up to the first date of planned strike action, the employers have now agreed a much-improved proposal... The significant change is that remote sign on will not be implemented on contracts, extensions, re awards of contracts, tendered in routes or as part of the tendering process. This will apply through the period up to and including 31st December 2022."

However, the union has guaranteed to Metroline that it can continue to operate RSO on the 139 route. Moreover, the company has given no undertaking that usage of the DAS app (Duty Allocation Software) will not become mandatory. The app is used by transport companies for the allocation of duties and monitoring the shift work of drivers. It allows them to sign on for duty away from the depot. The hardware systems for RSO have already been installed on buses.

Unite hastily arranged a ballot on the rotten agreement for two-days' time, recommending acceptance. This was backed by Metroline management, which urged on the company app, Blink, "Remember to vote today and don't let this opportunity to find a solution that works for all pass us by."

In contrast to the ballot on industrial action, this vote was arranged on a garage-by-garage basis. An overall majority of 80 percent voted to accept, with the notable exception of Kings Cross which voted by 95 percent to reject. The total number of votes cast was just 1,408—far less than half Unite's 4,000 membership at Metroline who were balloted for strike action.

Unite's role throughout was to wear down workers' opposition, before browbeating them to accept that nothing better was achievable. Drivers concluded that any further struggle under the auspices of Unite was a dead end. They are continuing to quit Unite in disgust and are voicing their opposition to the sell-out. Summing up the sentiments of many, one driver commented on social media, "We vote to strike and get rid for good Unite go ahead and delay RSO yet again unite NOT listening to their members."

The only thing "much improved" by the agreement is the relationship between Metroline and Unite. As Managing Director Stephen Harris stated after the vote, "I have always said throughout this process that working together with Unite is the best way forward, and I remain committed to dialogue as the best way to find solutions that work for us all."

Bus workers must draw the lessons of the sell-outs at Metroline, RATP and Go North West (Go -Ahead). Confronted with a wave of renewed militancy, Unite was able to derail these struggles and prevent their unification. The agreements reached betrayed drivers' demands to protect jobs, pay and conditions. In claiming "victory", Unite means it has further entrenched its relations with the private operators against the development of the class struggle.

The most striking example was at Go North West and the eleven-week indefinite strike action by over 400 Manchester bus drivers. The withdrawal of a "fire and rehire" threat by parent company Go-Ahead was based on Unite convincing the company that it could get what it wanted through an agreement with the union, which incorporated its own proposals of £1.3 million cuts, sacrificing drivers' terms and conditions.

A political and organisational break with the corporatist trade unions is the only way forward. Genuine organisations of mass working-class struggle are needed, challenging the economic and social framework which subordinates everything to the accumulation of profit by the corporations. We urge all workers who agree to join the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and the Socialist Equality Party.

*Join the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
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