

Abellio threatens London bus drivers over resort to charity food

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After a year that has seen the death of 60 bus workers in London from COVID-19, transport giant Abellio has threatened drivers at Southall depot with disciplinary action for eating charity food from a nearby property.

Abellio's letter, "RE: Charity Food Bags", was written by the depot's Driver Manager Corinne Bowry, "it has been brought to my attention that a few drivers have been taking food from a property which is located near Southall Park without consent.

"Please note the food is provided free of charge for the vulnerable only. Any drivers seen taking food without consent will be dealt with via company procedures."

Abellio's letter invited widespread condemnation after it was posted by drivers on Facebook.

"Maybe the drivers are hungry" wrote one bus worker. Another cautioned against uncritically accepting Abellio's version of events, "Who knows how many children this driver has, or what rent/overhead/mortgage might be. What debts he might be in. Wife/partner might have lost job. Totally wrong to judge without knowing the full facts."

Another wrote, "Crap pay deals won by the union ain't helping. Everything getting expensive but pay not increasing. Blame Unite".

Many called out the company's hypocrisy, "Maybe Abellio should pay their drivers more, then they would not need to use a food bank", wrote one driver. His colleague agreed, "From my experience you can be working buses and still be in a vulnerable family".

Abellio, a subsidiary of Dutch transport company NS, is one of the UK's largest transport operators, with combined revenue of £2.7 billion across London Bus and national rail services in 2020. While threatening workers with disciplinary action for taking charity food parcels, Abellio claimed £1.3 billion in government

coronavirus subsidies over the past year, funded by taxpayers. The company has also relinquished its contracts to run Greater Anglia, ScotRail, West Midlands and East Midlands rail citing ... financial difficulty.

A driver from Southall Depot told the WSWs, "At the end of the day, yes drivers are working, but they are not earning enough for themselves, after paying bills, to buy food. I saw the letter from Abellio, and I'm not happy with that.

"Probationary drivers are earning £350-£400 without overtime, and they are on probation for two years. Other drivers are on about £480. If they don't do overtime, they are struggling big time. Very few drivers in London only work five days a week."

On Friday, the depot's health and safety rep visited the charity's address to explain the situation facing drivers. A representative of the charity responded sympathetically, and the safety rep is planning to donate supplies on behalf of drivers from Southall. This is a far cry from the punitive actions of management.

Abellio's threats of disciplinary action have especially angered bus drivers in the aftermath of pay deals that have effectively cut wages for drivers.

Another Southall driver explained, "The agreement with Unite was for a 1.5 percent increase this year and a 2 percent increase next year, with a £750 bonus—but we still haven't got any back-pay owed from last year." For much of the pandemic London bus drivers worked Sunday rosters, losing hundreds of pounds in income per month.

"To be honest, even when you do get paid, you have to chase your money each week because they always underpay you. It's very difficult for drivers," he added.

A driver from Stamford Brook garage agreed. He told WSWs that drivers at his own company, London

United, owned by RATP, faced the same problems, “In 2019, it should have been 2.2 percent [pay increase] because that was the inflation rate. So, they’ve taken a 1.2 percent pay cut on that. Same at my garage. First of all, in 2019 the company offered 2.2 percent, but they [Unite] recommended we didn’t accept it ... we ended up getting 0.75 percent—not even 1 percent—on 2019-20, and then 1.5 percent on 2020-21.

“So, pay cuts all round, plus added contract changes in there as well. That’s a new tactic the companies have been doing, adding contract changes within the pay offer. If you accept the pay offer, you accept the contract changes as well.”

The veteran driver explained, “This new agreement the union have done with the company allows them to move us not only to any garage within London United, but to any company they own as well. So, it could be anywhere.”

He described the mood at Stamford Brook—where Unite’s recent pay deal with RATP was overwhelmingly rejected—as “rebellious, very rebellious. A lot of people are leaving—they’re not happy at all with what Unite have done.

“And with regards to the pay deal, recommending that no-one accepts the deal when it was 2.2 percent and then we end up with 0.7 percent. Especially not happy with that.”

The driver took a dim view of Abellio’s threats against drivers over taking food for the vulnerable, “I think that’s unbelievable. Because myself, through experience, I believe that new drivers *are* vulnerable, because they’re on very low wages. About £400 a month less than drivers on the full rate. They’re struggling for overtime, and I think anywhere they can get free food, free takeaways, they’re going to jump at the chance, and I think the company should take that into account. They’re not exactly paying good rates and they’re on that low rate for two years.

“Rents are very expensive in London. Your average studio flat’s £250 a week, a one or two-bedroom flat £300-£350 a week. All your wages go on rent and bills, so any free food from a takeaway is welcomed.”

Throughout the pandemic, many of London’s restaurants donated to key workers, with thousands of free meals delivered to hospitals to feed NHS workers struggling on poverty-level wages.

The same is true for bus workers, explains the driver

from Stamford Brook, “Some places actually bring food to the garages. Delicatessens finishing at the end of the night hand food out to drivers. And drivers welcome that, because it saves them money, which is very tight at the moment, especially after years of pay cuts. Wages are going down—but bills aren’t going down, rents aren’t going down, they’re going up. So, every bit helps, and I think it’s very unfair of the company doing that.”



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