

UK: Manchester bus drivers dispute Unite union's "victory" claim at Go North West

Tony Robson
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Manchester bus drivers have called into question the "victory" pronounced by Unite the union after the deal it struck at Go North West ending the 11 week strike at the Queens Road depot.

Drivers related their experiences and views, both on the strike by 400 workers against the imposition of inferior terms and conditions through a "fire and rehire" on contract threat and the consequences of the agreement recommended by Unite. They spoke during a campaign by Socialist Equality Party members to win support for the reinstatement of victimised London bus driver David O'Sullivan.

At the Stagecoach depot on Hyde Road and the Go North West garage on Queens Road, drivers supported the fight to defend basic safety during the pandemic and recounted their own bitter experiences with Unite, explaining how it sides with the company against them.

At Queens Road, the response of drivers was of disaffection both with the contents of the deal and how they were bounced into accepting it without time to consider the new terms and conditions drawn up between Unite and Go-Ahead, the parent company.

A driver with 15 years' experience commented, "We were just advised by the union to vote yes to accept. That was odd. I had my suspicions and asked why but they didn't tell us. I knew something was dodgy, so I voted no."

Another driver stated, "The deal is on a company app which we can't see. We had a meeting and all we voted on was 'fire and rehire', which was withdrawn, so Unite recommended a return to work. We'll find out the details of the deal next week."

The fact that drivers have still to be clarified on the contents of the deal three weeks after it was voted on testifies to the underhand role played by Unite. Even with the confusion deliberately generated to aid acceptance of the deal, a sizeable minority of 21.5 percent of strikers

voted "No."

To placate opposition, the Unite reps claimed that aspects of the agreement drivers found unacceptable would be taken up by the union when they returned to work. A driver of 10 years standing who rejected the agreement explained, "The union said when we get back in, we'll renegotiate, but we'll already be ensnared by then."

He pointed out that drivers were being told to accept concessions while the Go-Ahead Group, the largest private bus operator in the UK, was highly profitable. "You've got a multi-million pound company here but sometimes there's no radio on the buses. I haven't signed a contract. I said to the union, I thought we were being looked after! Have you seen our rotas—they're absolutely chronic. I'm interested in having time with my family. I do elongated days but now you don't necessarily get the weekend off.

"They say we're on good money. The minimum wage is nearly £10 an hour, we're on £12.52 an hour for all the responsibilities, looking after people in wheelchairs, working during the pandemic. We're worth a minimum £15 an hour. I thought they were looking after us but they've [union representatives] all got severance."

Throughout the dispute against the "fire and rehire" policy, Unite made a public show of opposing the plans to slash sickness pay during a pandemic and the imposition of flexibility with the rosters which ruled out any work/life balance. On both counts drivers explained how these had been changed to their detriment through the agreement. One driver said, "The sick pay has been reduced for everyone from 100 percent from start to end of the sickness period to 90 percent for the first four weeks." Another said, "We don't even know the rosters. The shift patterns are all over the show. You finish at 8pm and are back in at 4am."

The same Unite local union reps who advised workers

to accept the deal have applied for redundancy to seek work on better terms elsewhere. “Every single union rep is going. They get £10,000-20,000 each. The union requested that. The strike was never about ‘fire and rehire’. That was the union’s spin.”

For bus drivers’, opposition to fire and rehire was about defending their terms and conditions against company diktat. For Unite it belatedly sanctioned industrial action with the aim of convincing the company that it should be relied on to fulfil the role of industrial policeman and favoured partner of the company in ramping up exploitation.

Throughout the dispute Unite senior steward at Go North West, Colin Hayden, was a vociferous opponent of the SEP, as the only political tendency that opposed the isolation of the dispute and warned strikers against a sellout. The *World Socialist Web Site* consistently exposed how Unite, along with its allies in the Labour Party such as local Salford MP and Corbynite, Rebecca Long-Bailey, were promoting a £1.3 million cost cutting agenda as the basis for convincing the company to withdraw its fire and rehire policy. This became the blueprint for the final agreement.

Hayden intervened on the picket lines to stop strikers from taking leaflets and speaking to SEP members. He claimed that the outcome of the dispute on the terms agreed by Unite would provide the basis for restoring trade unionism at the heart of the workplace and spur on a nationwide struggle against fire and rehire contracts.

Hayden is now one of the union reps taking redundancy through the severance scheme set-up between Unite and Go-Ahead via the arbitration service, ACAS. When asked by SEP campaigners why he was leaving if the deal was a “victory” he cited only “personal reasons.” He has not updated his Facebook page since the day the agreement was voted through. His last entry has a poster with clenched fists with the slogan, “There is power in the union” with a message on the strike which concludes, “They went out as work colleagues, They will return as a FAMILY.”

At the Hyde Road depot in the Ardwick district of Manchester run by rival Stagecoach, bus drivers had not been informed by the union about anything to do with the fight by their colleagues at Go North West’s garage at Queens Road. The garages are less than four miles apart. Unite had opposed any direct appeal to bus drivers for solidarity action at Stagecoach, which employs around 2,000 drivers in Manchester, or First Greater Manchester—the other main private operator in the city.

Even leafleting the other bus depots had been ruled out by the union on the grounds that it could be interpreted as secondary picketing.

Don, a former shop steward, explained in relation to Go North West, “There are loads of guys there now who realise that they didn’t win the strike. Loads of guys have left there and come here, because it is still better terms and conditions. At least three drivers have started this week.”

The first-hand accounts of bus drivers underscores the utterly cynical character of the sellout at Go North West. To date the agreement has not been made publicly available. The revelations now surfacing about its implications will only be a foretaste of what is to come. In addition, there are the unpaid meal breaks and the lengthening of the working day that must lead to job cuts.

The claim of victory promoted by Unite and recycled by the entire pseudo-left serves to conceal social reality. The WSWS has already written on the role of Ian Allinson of the RS21 group, who serves as the industrial action co-ordinator for Manchester Trades Union Council. The high profile of the dispute elevated him from this obscure position to that of chief apologist for the union hierarchy and its local officials, including sanctioning the dispute’s betrayal.

His attempts to smear the SEP as “scabs” and censor the articles of the WSWS on social media were aimed at delegitimising opposition to Unite, right at the point at which workers were seeking to resist a return to work based upon the union’s cost cutting agenda.

Bus drivers will now be able to draw their own conclusions as to who acted in defence of the interest of the working class. As the WSWS stated in its appraisal of the deal, “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 rank-and-file committees.”



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