

UK: Unite union calls off Greater Manchester Metrolink strike over pay

Margot Miller
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The first intervention among public transport workers by Sharon Graham as General Secretary of Unite has been to call off a strike on the largest tram network system in the UK.

Unite the union has called off the planned strike action by workers on Greater Manchester's tram/light rail system, Metrolink.

Due to take place this weekend, the strike would have disrupted thousands attending major sporting events such as the home fixture of Manchester United on Saturday and the Great Manchester Run on Sunday. Further strikes had been scheduled for October 10 and 24 consisting of one day stoppages.

The 300 drivers and supervisors were angered by an insulting pay offer of just 1 percent. Even this miserly amount was spread over two years—0.3 percent backdated from January to March 2021, plus a 0.7 percent increase from April 2021 to April 2022.

The consortium which operates the tram and light rail services, Keolis/Amey, had shown its utter contempt by offering a single percentage pay increase, well below inflation, which is currently 3.9 percent. The depth of opposition was expressed in a 97 percent vote to strike.

Faced with a wage-cutting exercise the response of Unite was not a commitment to fight but to offer its services to Keolis/Amey in preventing a mobilisation of tram workers against the private operator. Since February, the union had been engaged in fruitless pay talks with the company. Prior to calling off the strike action on September 21, Dave Roberts, Unite regional officer said, "Strike action and the inevitable disruption that will bring can still be averted if management returns to the negotiating table with a realistic pay offer."

The actions of Unite are not "negotiations" but a conspiracy against tram workers. The union tabled no opposing demand to the provocative proposal of the private operator. What Unite means by a "realistic pay offer" is not based on preventing the erosion of tram workers living standards through inflation and tax hikes by the government,

but the least Keolis/Amey will part with to ensure industrial peace and prevent disruption to its profitable operations.

The demobilisation of Greater Manchester tram drivers has been directly overseen by newly elected Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham.

This week Graham announced that she would not be attending the upcoming Labour Party conference because her priorities were with workers in dispute. "I am days into my leadership—we currently have 16 industrial disputes going on, from Tesco drivers to Weetabix to locksmiths in Scunthorpe and Wolverhampton.

"What I need to do is be with those workers in dispute and personally take leadership."

The first intervention among public transport workers by Graham as general secretary has been to call off a strike on the largest tram network system in the UK.

This backroom operator and seasoned trade union bureaucrat has been hailed by the pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), as the leadership pivot for a militant turn within the Trades Union Congress. In a September 12 meeting of the industrial front of the SP, the National Shop Stewards Network, Graham stated that she had in her first act as general secretary brought together the membership who were involved in 22 disputes—by which she means only the local union bureaucrats. Based on her most recent pronouncement her actions have been to reduce these struggles by more than a quarter in the space of one week—from 22 to 16!

The actions of Graham in closing down strike action against Metrolink is entirely consistent with her corporatist programme, summed up by the term "leverage," in which disputes have been ended over fire and rehire because Unite agreed to the destruction of terms and conditions without the need for the ultimatum to be employed. This was the death sentence for the 11-week strike by Go North West bus drivers in Manchester, which Graham directly oversaw in May this year.

This makes a mockery of her claim that "Unite will not allow our members to have their pay and living standards

eroded by private companies who are seeking to profit by operating a public service.”

Metrolink began operating in 1992. Since then, it has expanded to become the largest light rail system in the UK, with 99 stops on 65 miles of track across the Greater Manchester conurbation serving a population of around 3 million. It is owned by Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM), part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority headed by Labour Party Mayor Andy Burnham. In 2017, TfGM signed a 10 year contract with Paris-based global conglomerate Keolis/Amey to run day-to-day operations.

While the taxpayer financed the provision of the infrastructure and purchase of the trams, Keolis/Amey has coined in vast profits. In 2019, Keolis’ total global revenues jumped 10.9 percent in a year to £6.58 billion.

The sabotage of the strike by Unite is also in line with the function of the Labour-controlled authority, which has collaborated to the hilt with the Johnson government in throwing open the economy while public health measures have been jettisoned.

Burnham’s response to the calling of the strike was to declare, “I’m pleased to say that both sides are getting back round the table this week and there will be further talks.”

Danny Vaughan, TfGM’s head of Metrolink, said, “There is no good time for strike action, but the days picked will impact on participants and spectators of some very significant and much-welcome events, which have returned to Manchester post-Covid.”

He pledged to let people know “what services will be running, if any, and what alternative transport options will be available in the event of any strike as soon as possible.”

At Go North West, the Labour authority allowed the parent company Go-Ahead to operate a scab strikebreaking operation to run its 30 routes consisting of around a dozen bus and coach subcontractors.

Keolis/Amey is attempting to claw back the last pay rise tram workers won in a three-year agreement in 2018, of 3.7 percent for year 1, 10 percent for year 2, inflation proofed for 2020. It is also making its workforce pay for lost revenue during the pandemic. That same year Unite forced through a sellout agreement at Sheffield Supertram after tram workers took five days of strike action demanding an immediate rise of 50 pence an hour to tackle low pay. Unite accepted a pay offer of 30 pence an hour, a 6 pence increase on an offer it had described as “derisory.”

The working class is not only facing great dangers to health as the pandemic spirals out of control, but also an unprecedented onslaught against living standards to pay for the government’s Covid bailout.

Keolis/Amey was a beneficiary of government largesse,

receiving a further £16 million bringing total government support to the light rail systems in England to £200 million.

The main aim of Unite, like every other union, is to defend company profits whatever the cost to lives and livelihoods. It is thanks to the unions that workers have been kept on the job in unsafe workplaces, including schools, during the pandemic. With the lifting of all safety restrictions and the reopening of schools, transport is as crowded as ever, super spreading the virus.

On the weekend of September 11-12, 160,000 people made their way to the Parklife Festival in Manchester’s Heaton Park, which was suspended last year. The trams in Manchester were jam packed with young people, a large proportion of whom would not have been vaccinated.

The unions have overseen a decades-long decline in wages and conditions, while the profits of companies have risen. Since the pandemic began, profits soared while workers and their families have suffered and died disproportionately.

The struggle to defend jobs and wages is global. Metrolink’s operator, the Keolis/Amey consortium, operates in 16 countries where it employs a total 65,000 workers. In every country, workers face an intensification of exploitation with the collaboration of the unions.

This struggle is inextricably bound up with the fight for health and safety in the workplace, impossible without a mass mobilisation to unify the growing strike movement, to eliminate and eradicate the virus.

To take that fight forward, the International Committee of the Fourth International has called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). For more information, contact us today.



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