

“The union sold us down the river. Conditions are worse. I feel let down.”

Go North West bus drivers refute “victory” claim of Unite’s Sharon Graham

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The newly elected general secretary of Unite the union, Sharon Graham, has boasted of being instrumental in the supposed “victory” of bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester.

The claim is echoed by pseudo-left groups including the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, who backed Graham as the “workers’ candidate” to replace Len McCluskey.

Graham and her political apologists state that while McCluskey was still in charge of the union, Graham’s “Organising and Leverage Department” played the instrumental role in forcing Go North West to withdraw its threat to fire bus drivers and rehire them on inferior contracts, securing a deal to end the 11 week strike on May 18.

Speaking as the featured speaker at an online conference of the Socialist Party-run National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) on September 12, Graham told her fawning audience, “I was with these drivers in dispute, we had leverage, we had strike action and we were able to push that employer back... There was a dispute which was going on for weeks, after weeks, after weeks and the confidence these workers had that we could win, making sure the union’s resources were pointing with them was critical to them being able to win.”

Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* will know this to be a bare-faced lie and that Go North West drivers suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of Unite. Included in the sellout deal were over a million pounds worth of savings agreed by the union, in addition to a further saving of £200,000 through a year-long pay freeze.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party have spoken to the drivers at Manchester’s Queen’s Road depot, asking their opinion of Unite’s deal and Graham’s boasting.

Some explained that the vote to return took place while they were kept in the dark by the union as to what they were signing up to, and that a substantial minority of 21 percent of strikers voted “No” to the union/management deal.

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.” Another driver who rejected the deal said, “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 We had a meeting and all we voted on was ‘fire and rehire’, which was withdrawn, so Unite recommended a return to work.”

“It wasn’t a victory,” commented one driver.

Another explained, “Drivers are leaving because they are not happy with the union and the company. We didn’t win, we only got a £1,500 lump sum to sign the contract. The union guys walked away with [redundancy payments] £20,000 tax free.”

“The union sold us down the river. Conditions are worse. I feel let down,” said another driver.

His colleague added, “It wasn’t a victory. They [Unite] sold us out then f***ed off. No one knows what the contract was.”

A driver of 20 years said, “We got stitched up big time. I believe people are fighting a grievance using Unite’s procedures against Unite because they did not use the severance package as it was intended.” Describing one aspect of the worsening of conditions, he said, “If we’re still out when the shift ends, we’ve got to carry on for 45 minutes—enforced overtime.

“The union said don’t worry about the contract, just sign it. We didn’t read it, we just got management spiel who told us to sign it or lose your job. That’s no different from fire and rehire [which the union claimed they got off the table]. We want a new union.”

Many workers told the SEP that conditions are so bad that many have left the Queen’s Road depot in search of better terms at other bus companies. One said, “The number of men who’ve left the company is unbelievable and the number who’ve left the union is unbelievable.”

A cleaner at the depot who was not called out on strike by Unite said that “150 drivers walked out... Cleaners used to get an extra 50p weekend rate and after six months they took that off the table. This was while [Unite senior shop steward] Colin

Hayden was in charge here.”

Another driver simply said, “We are worse off now following the strike”.

An experienced driver commented, “It’s not a great victory. I’ve read the contract and signed it, but we had no choice as I’d have been out of the door if I didn’t.

“We now have to work longer hours for the same money. I can see that on my pay slip. The hourly rate has improved but you’ve worked 45 hours instead of the 38. Last year you worked 38 hours for the same money as they weren’t slashing that time between shifts.

“The sick pay is definitely worse. Unpaid meal breaks have gone up. You are working longer hours. At the end of the week, it says you’ve worked 38 hours, but you’ve actually worked 42-43 hours and not been paid for it. What’s next, is it going to be an hour and a half or two hours unpaid? Where’s the end of this?

“After talking to some of the older drivers, the conditions have been constantly going down over the last 20-30 years. I think the union is responsible. Over 20-30 years the negotiations have been bad. That’s the bus industry in the UK, it’s bad.

“If you want to go up the road to Diamond Bus, the Bolton depot, they have it far worse than here. They’ve got existing drivers on good terms, but all the new starters have crap terms, and the union has allowed that to happen. That’s Unite.

“First [Bus] sold both depots. Go-Ahead took over here [at Queen’s Road], and Diamond Bus took over in Bolton. But as soon as they came they slashed conditions of every new starter and Unite agreed to that. They don’t care.”

The driver estimated that around 200 workers have left Queen’s Road as a result of the intolerable conditions. He added, “Six Unite reps took the redundancy deal and a lot of them got other jobs. I think that they are at Stagecoach now. They’ve gone and left us to fight to potentially get what we’ve lost back.”

The SEP, unlike the pseudo-left groups who have nothing to say, can speak to Go North West drivers because we were the only party which told them the truth during their strike. When Unite organised the popping of champagne bottles on the picket lines we warned that “bus workers should beware of union bureaucrats claiming imminent victory!” We explained that, if left in the hands of the trade union bureaucracy, the strike would end in defeat. The way forward was for drivers to take matters into their own hands through the formation of a rank-and-file committee.

The SEP was viciously attacked by union officials during the strike, including by Ian Allinson, a Manchester Trades Union Council executive committee member and supporter of the SWP splinter group, RS21.

Even before Unite officially ended the dispute, Allinson had to admit in a May 6 article on the RS21 website that “substantial concessions” offered by Unite “are included in the

deal”. He nevertheless proclaimed it as “a significant victory if the pressure can be maintained.”

In response to a May 11 WSWs article noting that the details of the rotten deal were being kept from strikers, Allinson stated that this was “the usual wildly inaccurate garbage” and that the WSWs “aren’t part of the workers’ movement as far as I’m concerned... But life’s too short to waste time with these scabs.”

Allinson, like Hayden and other local Unite officials who were attacking the SEP/WSWS, were all heavily involved in promoting Sharon Graham’s election campaign. On August 25, RS21 ran an article, “Sharon Graham wins stunning Unite victory” with this petty functionary hailed for having “shocked the establishment.” This was authored by “rs21 members in Unite,” i.e., Allinson and other self-described Unite “activists”.

It is noteworthy that while praising Graham to the skies, the article cannot even mention her self-proclaimed “victory” at Go North West. But such silence, and the hardships imposed on Go North West drivers, are considered a small price to pay for the opportunities Graham’s leadership of Unite offers them.

The focal point of Graham’s election campaign was her pledge to get “back to the workplaces” and to strengthen the union. What she means by this is reinforcing Unite’s bureaucratic apparatus as an ally of corporate management in policing industrial unrest and imposing the attacks demanded by Go North West and the rest. This is what attracts the likes of Allinson and Hayden to her agenda. Hers is a siren call to the pseudo-left because it offers them positions of comfort within that apparatus as local, regional and hopefully national enforcers of bureaucratic fiat. RS21 writes that “Sharon Graham won on a commitment to return power and focus to the workplaces. We need to use this opportunity to revitalise our union at workplace level and beyond. She has told supporters that she wants to build on the networks brought together in her campaign...”

Drivers at Go North West found at great cost to themselves that Unite, Sharon Graham and their pseudo-left apologists are their political enemies. They must be broken with and confronted if further defeats are to be prevented. Workers everywhere must also draw fully on this vital experience to arm themselves for the fight ahead.



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