

UK: Unite blocks Manchester Metrolink tram workers strike

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For the second time in as many weeks, the union Unite, under newly elected General Secretary Sharon Graham, has intervened to stop strike action by 300 Greater Manchester tram drivers and supervisors for a genuine pay rise against the private operator Keolis/Amey.

A one-day stoppage on the Metrolink tram service was planned for October 10, to be followed by 24-hour stoppages on October 15, 18 and 24. Unite suspended the scheduled October 10 strike on October 8, citing an improved offer it would put to a vote. The union has not publicly released details of the pay offer it is putting to its members.

Metrolink provides a textbook example of how the trade union bureaucracy works to demobilise opposition at workplaces up and down the country. Since Metrolink workers voted by 97 percent for strike action against the original offer of a miserly 1 percent over two years, Unite has repeatedly suspended strike action to consider meagre uplifts and demoralise and wear down its members.

On Unite's website Graham boasted, "By standing united and firm to demand a fair and well-deserved pay rise, Unite members at Metrolink have forced the hand of management and ensured that a fresh pay offer has been tabled. Unite is utterly determined to secure proper and lasting improvements to the pay and conditions of our members."

From what has been reported by tram drivers, the latest revised offer is a 3 percent increase this year and the same uplift for 2022, well below the current inflation rate of 4.8 percent (RPI).

The pretext for suspending strike action last time, on the weekend of September 25/6, was an even lower offer of 5 percent over two years, which Graham also hyped up as a "greatly improved offer." That offer was rejected by tram workers, a fact not reported by Unite. The rejection reflects an emerging defiance in the working class of both the employers and their stooges in the trade union

bureaucracy.

Graham had been so confident that the deal would go through that Unite announced it had "secured a pay increase". However, the fake militant credentials provided for her by the pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) failed to stem workers' opposition to accepting a de facto pay cut.

The rhetoric from Unite regarding the dispute at Metrolink and pay disputes at bus operator Stagecoach is meant to conceal its efforts to close down all such disputes. Graham stated in a Unite press release on October 7 that she was preparing battle plans with Unite reps across Britain and Ireland to fight "bread line pay rates". The very next day strike action was suspended at Metrolink and at Stagecoach in the north-west, where 250 drivers in nearby Preston and Chorley were due to walk out for three days this week over pay. Once again Unite has not cited the details of the pay offer being put to a vote.

Stagecoach, Britain's largest bus and coach operator, faces 20 disputes across the country among bus workers represented by Unite, including 1,000 drivers in Manchester. Unite is urging the company to work with it to prevent a national strike by settling the disputes locally based on meagre increases, with the union not even tabling a national pay demand.

Metrolink workers have told the WSWS that they view Unite as a "company union", whose recognition agreement with Keolis/Amey is a sweetheart deal. They spoke of the disregard of their safety during the pandemic and the lack of any "work/life" balance, with as little as one week's notice of their shift patterns as opposed to the three months previously.

These sentiments were also voiced in posts by bus and transport workers in response to a *Manchester Evening News* article announcing the suspension of the Metrolink strike on October 8.

A bus driver who had participated in the longest strike against fire and rehire, at Go North West in Manchester, stated, “Don’t trust unite the union boys and girls, we trusted them throughout a 12 week strike at queens road bus depot and got sold out we’re now working the shifts the union was dead against the only difference is all the union reps bar 1 took a severance deal and left us all to face the shifts they suddenly recommended we agree to.”

Another stated, “Same at Stagecoach, them useless union bums recommending crappy deal. Company doesn’t have try to explain, those muppets tell drivers to accept 24 p [pence] pay rise and be happy about it. Have you seen union reps driving buses on lates, nights or weekends?”

Another bus worker wrote, “In 30 years, Unite has NEVER been on strike at Metrolink, and they never will.

“All the company do, is run up to the wire, then tell the Treasurer, Chairman and Secretary that they will be taken off their prime weekday early shifts with every weekend off, and put on rosters like the other 420 drivers.

“The thought of 9.5 hour duties, late shifts and working weekends soon has them begging the union members to accept the company's offer.

“The only way any staff at Metrolink will get pay parity with the rest of the industry, is to get rid of Unite and bring in a proper union.”

The comments from the Go North West driver expose Unite’s claim, backed by the pseudo-left groups, that the strike ended in a “victory” thanks to Graham. The fire and rehire threat was withdrawn only because Unite agreed to help impose £1.3 million in cuts in a sell-out, including a rotten shift system the worker denounces.

Graham has boasted that her “leverage” strategy secured the deal, but this is a corporatist agenda based on strengthening the collaboration of Unite with the employers and the government against the resurgence of the class struggle. Graham and Unite are continuing to play this role at Metrolink, Stagecoach and across the transport network.

The WSWs was alone in opposing the betrayal at Go North West and allowing bus drivers to speak out as the Socialist Equality Party urged the formation of a rank-and-file committee to break Unite’s stranglehold. This struggle was waged in opposition to Unite’s apologists, the SP and SWP, who were busy campaigning for Graham to be elected on the strength of her “victory” at Go North West.

Both groups have stopped writing on Go North West, while the SP has not written a single article on the

Metrolink dispute and the SWP has not published an article since September 28. This dutifully boosted Unite’s first revised below inflation pay offer, rejected by tram workers, which it described as “vastly improved.”

The orientation to the SP and SWP is not to the workers trapped in rotten organisations and seeking a means to fight back, but to defending the grip of the union bureaucracy.

The struggles of transport workers are driven by the fundamental conflict between the working class and the corporate oligarchy. The pandemic has intensified this class struggle, as obscene levels of wealth have been accumulated while workers receive little or no protection from the virus and exploitation has been ramped up. This also brings the working class into head-on conflict with the trade unions in country after country.

In Lyon, France, tram and bus workers struck against Keolis on September 30, demanding better protection against assaults and increased pay, in defiance of the trade unions CGT and FO who claimed to have reached an agreement with the company.

To wage a unified struggle with transport workers throughout the UK, France and internationally against their common corporate enemies, means Metrolink workers setting up a rank-and-file committee and forging direct links with their fellow workers based on a programme to secure safe, well-paid jobs and the eradication of COVID-19 using the full range of health measures to protect life, paid for by big business. This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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