

Unite's fake campaign against London buses Remote Sign On

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Unite's re-launched campaign against the introduction of Remote Sign On (RSO) across London's bus network is cynical theatrics. Behind its placards, posters, online petition and flyers, the union has worked with Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and the bus companies to ensure RSO's rollout.

RSO means drivers will report for duty onboard their bus instead of at the garage. It will mean pay cuts of 7-12 percent with drivers forced to travel to bus routes on their own time. Technology for RSO has already been installed by companies including RATP and Abellio, with no opposition from Unite.

The union has allowed RSO's implementation on several routes since 2005. These include Metroline routes 139, 306 and 328, Arriva routes 2, 19, 38, 73 and Tower Transit routes C2 and 3.

John Murphy, Unite's Lead Officer for Buses, declared in August, "It is imperative that the mayor and Transport for London takes action to outlaw remote sign-on at the earliest opportunity in order to avoid industrial action on the London bus network later this year."

Murphy's public appeal to Khan is role play. His threats are a damage limitation exercise, aimed at steering the near universal opposition to RSO among drivers into dead end appeals to the Labour Party. According to a survey published by Unite on August 16, RSO is opposed by 84 percent of drivers.

RSO is a danger to workers' health and safety:

It will increase driver fatigue by lengthening the working day, adding up to 10 hours of unpaid travel time onto already exhausting shifts and overtime due to low pay rates.

Drivers will be forced to wait for their bus duty at isolated locations, opening them to risk of attack, especially for those starting early mornings and finishing late at night in darkness.

Drivers will lose access to garage canteen, mess room

and restroom facilities. Portacabins, unventilated shipping containers and vending machines plonked next to a bus stop are not acceptable break facilities for bus drivers.

In the midst of an ongoing pandemic that continues to claim the lives of London bus drivers, how will they be monitored for symptoms and how will their fitness to drive be assessed?

RSO has a political dimension too. By forcing drivers to sign-on remotely, operators aim to break up the camaraderie, friendships and collective power of bus workers who will be isolated and placed under constant surveillance.

London bus drivers have repeatedly tried to block RSO, but their attempts have been sabotaged by Unite. Unite's "campaign" is a toothless saga of "consultative ballots" and outright collusion with TfL and the bus companies.

In August 2020, a "consultative" ballot of Metroline West drivers returned a massive 99.2 percent strike vote and 97.8 percent at Metroline Travel. Two months later, the same drivers voted 'yes' to strike. But Unite promptly scurried into ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) with company MD Stephen Harris and the ballot result was cancelled.

In the closing months of 2020, as a second wave of the pandemic swept through garages, Unite took no action to protect drivers. It allowed 69 bus workers to die from COVID-19 without organising a single strike. Grotesque safety breaches proceeded with Unite's blessing, including a dysfunctional track and trace system, while union officials worked with management to intimidate, victimise, suspend and sack drivers who spoke up on health and safety, including Cricklewood driver David O'Sullivan.

In May this year, Unite held a new round of strike ballots against RSO at Metroline. Unite regional officer Mary Summers claimed a vote for strike action would "shake some sense into Metroline, which needs to not just

pause its remote sign on plans but discard them into the dustbin of history.”

WSWS has documented how Unite responded to the further massive “yes” vote which followed, by calling off all strikes based on Khan agreeing a “moratorium” on RSO’s implementation until 2022. All that Khan offered was a pause, or the appearance of a pause, with a risk assessment report into RSO that would be published this autumn and discussed with “stakeholders” (not bus drivers) this winter.

On June 18, Khan responded to a question about the moratorium, telling the Conservative Party’s Keith Prince, “There is no moratorium as you suggest.” Khan continued, “However, Metrolink has recently agreed with Unite the Union that they will not be introducing any new remote sign on facilities until at least the end of 2022. Unite the Union has been involved in developing the scope of the research so that driver concerns are taken into consideration.”

A leaked TfL document from January 2021 shows that Unite’s input into the risk assessment will be used to facilitate RSO’s implementation. Marked “TfL Confidential”, its summary states that RSO “does deliver operational efficiencies” and includes an “Appendix C” from Unite with just four bullet points noting “risks” to drivers from RSO. TfL’s risk assessment concludes: “Operators should continue to be able to introduce remote sign on facilities.”

The document continues, “TfL should introduce a minimum standard for remote sign-ons in new tenders to ensure key safety and well-being standards are maintained. Operators would be expected to apply the same minimum standard to any other remote sign on introduced.” London bus drivers and their families are already familiar with TfL’s “safety and well-being standards”.

Unite’s collusion with TfL and the bus operators is the source of growing anger among bus workers who have left the union in their thousands. Recent disputes at Stagecoach and Metrolink have seen union recommended pay deals rejected, joining a wave of similar rebellions by autoworkers, miners, steel workers and rail workers in the United States, South Africa, and Europe. But a group of “union activists” led by Labour Party member James Rossi and members of pseudo-left groups including the Socialist Party, have intensified their promotion of Unite. They are seeking to deflect workers’ anger and bring it under the control of the unions and the Labour Party.

Rossi long promoted himself as a Unite activist and

militant. But the union’s collusion with TfL became so naked that he announced earlier this year he was quitting Unite and encouraged workers to join the Rail, Maritime and Transport union. Rossi has since thrown himself back behind Unite, joining the crush of pseudo-left groups who have promoted Sharon Graham’s election to the post of general secretary as something akin to the second coming of Christ. The career bureaucrat was elected on just 46,696 votes out of 1.2 million members, but has received saturation promotion by the pseudo-left and capitalist media who are bolstering the unions for the sole purpose of suppressing the class struggle and preserving capitalism, on which the bureaucracy’s comfortable lifestyles rest.

Last week, Unite’s “campaign” against RSO saw Labour MP Bambos Charalambous visit Palmers Green garage where he stood alongside Rossi and other drivers. Charalambous Tweeted, “I’m supporting @unitetheunion’s campaign against remote sign on as it is unsafe and bad for drivers & passengers”. His Tweet, retweeted by Rossi, included a photo of himself behind the wheel of a London bus, a standard photo op favoured by Khan and other Labour politicians.

Rossi’s constant flip-flopping is the outcome of a political perspective rooted in the defence of the trade unions and the Labour Party. Workers can only oppose the ruthless assault on their conditions, livelihoods, and future by organising independently of these pro-capitalist organisations. Austerity, continuing mass deaths from the pandemic, militarism and the growing threat of world war and dictatorship, can be fought successfully only based on a socialist programme that rejects the dictates of the financial oligarchy and that champions the international unity of the working class. This is the perspective of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

The Socialist Equality Party urges bus and transport workers to join this fight, form a rank-and-file committee at your workplace, and affiliate to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Contact here for more information.



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