

Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop exploitation!

Statement of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
9 November 2021

Bus drivers are demanding a push to reverse sweatshop pay and conditions that have led to an exodus of drivers from the industry. But Unite the union and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) are working to sabotage a fightback, enforcing company pay deals that amount to further savage wage cuts.

Nearly two years into the global pandemic, there is a shortage of 4,000 bus drivers nationally. The figure is closer to 10,000 if companies' reliance on overtime is factored in. Drivers are reaching the limits of what they are prepared to endure. At Cricklewood garage in north west London, for example, 86 drivers left last month, with management unable to fill 129 duties last week.

Drivers are voting with their feet, punishing the companies for years of brutal exploitation and abuse that assumed criminal proportions during the pandemic, resulting in 70 deaths from COVID-19 across the London bus network.

Thousands have left for better paid positions as HGV lorry drivers, and more are set to follow once they have completed their training. Thousands of East European drivers have returned home following Brexit, disgusted by the Johnson government's anti-immigrant measures, and unable to afford spiralling costs for food, housing, utilities and transport that have hit low paid workers hardest.

The bus companies have responded to labour shortages by forcing drivers to work unsustainable overtime, causing fatigue, stress, illness and collisions, pushing drivers to the brink. They are cancelling services and cutting routes, leaving passengers stranded. By rights, the bus operators should be stripped of their license.

At garages there are calls for action, including overtime bans and a boycott of working days off. But the companies have the union on their side and are determined to resist any threat to their profits. The precondition for any successful fightback is a rebellion against the pro-company unions and the election of rank-

and-file strike committees across the bus network to plan a strategy for victory.

Driver pay: Fact vs fiction

Media reports that London bus drivers earn £32,000 a year versus £70,000 for HGV lorry drivers are misleading. The average hourly pay for a London bus driver is £12.43 according to Payscale.com. This equates to £27,000 a year based on a 40-hour week. But this *average* figure disguises the extent of pay inequality and exploitation enforced on Unite's watch:

- New entrants start at £10.26 an hour on average, with pay capped at lower rates for up to five years. This is a two-tier wage system. A constant flow of cheap labour is used to suppress wages across the network. Our newer colleagues face the same living costs and deserve equal pay!

- Low hourly pay is accompanied by overtime to make ends meet. This is not a choice. Many drivers are working up to 77 hours per week, and up to 13 days straight. Overtime rates, including for Saturday and Sunday work, are negligible. The 8-hour day championed a century ago is non-existent.

- Privatisation and the carve-up of the bus network has produced a patchwork of sub-standard pay-rates. A deliberate divide and rule strategy by the bus operators is enforced by Unite, keeping wages low and preventing a united fight.

“Frontline heroes”

At the start of the pandemic, politicians and the media hailed bus drivers as “frontline heroes”. But we did not ask to be herded into COVID-infested workplaces with Unite’s blessing and denied protection. Lives were sacrificed to profits resulting in a horrific and ongoing death toll.

The pandemic mantra “we’re all in this together” was a lie used to block any challenge from the working class to the Conservative government’s herd immunity agenda that has claimed over 165,000 lives. Labour’s policy of “constructive criticism” of the Tories played the same role. Unite’s tripartite agreement with the bus operators and Transport for London (TfL), signed in April 2020, pledged “industrial harmony” and “operational efficiency”. Strike votes on driver fatigue were cancelled and pay awards suspended.

At the start of 2021, facing mounting anger, Unite balloted for industrial action on pay. But the union did everything it could to divide drivers, company-by-company, garage-by-garage, imposing sellout below-inflation pay deals, including 2.25 percent at London United, 1.25 percent at London Sovereign, 1 percent at Quality Line and 1.5 percent at Arriva North.

According to the Department for Transport, bus drivers’ wages have fallen 10 percent in the last year while inflation has reached 5 percent.

In recent weeks, Unite and the RMT have prevented more than 20 pay disputes across the UK from becoming a national strike movement. Stagecoach drivers delivered overwhelming strike mandates that Unite betrayed, ramming through below-inflation pay settlements hailed as victories by newly elected Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham.

The bus companies claim they have “no money” to fund wage increases. This barefaced lie is backed by Unite. A union “briefing update” following talks between Metroline and Unite convenors and reps on November 3, declared “the company will have to restructure to remain sustainable”. It claimed, “Every employee has a vested interest in the company” and called on drivers to offer solutions to save costs!

Metroline generated £263.77 million in revenue during 2020 and its parent company ComfortDelGro is worth £2.54 billion. If the bus companies cannot afford to run a service they should be taken over and placed under public ownership, their profits used to provide a safe, efficient and affordable transport network for all.

Drivers are in a strong position. A global supply chain crisis is fuelling a mood of resistance among transport and

logistics workers across the UK, Europe, the United States, Asia and Latin America. The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is fighting for a strategy to win, linking the fight for pay with urgent health measures to stop the pandemic and reverse the decades-long attack on conditions. We propose the following demands:

- A 25 percent across the board wage increase to compensate for decades of stagnating pay rates that have failed to keep pace with the cost of living. Such an increase would mean that drivers no longer have to rely on overtime just to survive. Differential pay-rates between companies and grades to be abolished.

- Overtime rates increased to time-and-a-half standard, double-time for Saturdays and double-time-and-a-half for Sundays and public holidays.

- An end to bullying, harassment and victimisation of bus workers! Freedom of speech on social media and company apps. No driver to suffer reprisals for calling out company breaches of terms and conditions and COVID safety.

- Protection against the pandemic, including proper track and trace, mandatory reporting of infections and full pay for all drivers self-isolating. Mask-wearing and social distancing to be enforced by TfL on all buses, and installation of medical grade ventilation in vehicles, garages and break facilities.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee urges drivers at all garages to elect rank-and-file committees to start planning a coordinated and long overdue fightback. A network of rank-and-file organisations, cutting across divisions between companies and industries, and crossing national borders, will link-up the disparate struggles of bus and transport workers, break the isolation being imposed by Unite, the RMT and other unions, and unite workers into a powerful force.

Please contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee for more information and assistance in this fight: londonbusrankandfile@protonmail.com



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