

Daily Mirror boosts Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham's "crack squad"

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Last Saturday the *Daily Mirror* newspaper ran an exclusive, "Unite union's 'crack squad' wins breakthrough 20% pay deals for lorry drivers".

The article portrays the union as waging a successful campaign winning substantial pay rises. Quotes from Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and references to her close-knit team indicate that it was prepared in collaboration at the highest level between the union and author Chris McLaughlin.

The epic characterisation of the endeavours of Graham and her closest associates among local Unite representatives owes more to the plot line of a bad Hollywood blockbuster than to serious journalism. It is an exercise in selective reporting to make the case that Unite is transforming the lives of workers for the better, which ignores its broader record.

The article foregrounds three pay settlements in order to claim of a "string of victories" over the past few months which "were accredited to the creation of the union's "special disputes unit".

To put this into perspective these pay settlements cover a grand total of 153 workers—around 0.31 percent of the 50,000 lorry drivers Unite represents across the UK and Ireland. It is dwarfed by the overall Unite membership of over a million, most of whom face wages falling behind the current inflation rate of 5 percent.

The main examples cited are 39 HGV drivers at a logistics hub in Chippenham, Wiltshire who received a 20 percent rise; 24 Liverpool tanker drivers in bulk liquid food products who received 17.5 percent; and 90 Argos drivers in north-west England who received an uplift from £11.41 an hour to £15.

What emerges from the article is that the special disputes unit under Graham acts as a "crack-down unit" on strike action, targeting the haulage industries where a massive shortage of HGV drivers could easily spark a wave of strikes that could paralyse the economy and act

as a spark for a general counter offensive by workers.

Millions have followed press reports of a shortage of up to 100,000 HGV drivers and how labour shortages generally should strengthen the hand of workers in the fight for better wages and conditions. Unite's "crack squad" is offering its services to the employers to contain the threat posed, with the article going on to note favourably, "Strike action that could have halted car production at BMW Mini in Oxford was recently averted when Unite drivers for a components firm were awarded 27% over two years."

This, the essential content of Graham and Unite's corporatist agenda, is what the *Mirror*, which has close ties to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy, is touting.

It is noteworthy that the only other settlement listed as supposedly representing a list of "above-inflation deals... with Heinz, Sainsbury's, naval bases and for refuse workers in London" involves "at least 200 cement lorry drivers, who are essential for the building industry," who "will get rises of 2.75% backdated to the start of the year plus 3.25% from January.

The 200 cement lorry drivers at Hudson UK have not secured an above inflation deal at all. Unite averted industrial action voted for by the workers after they rejected a 2.5 percent rise, based on a 0.25 revision, backdated to the beginning of the year to compensate for a miniscule increase. A strike would have stalled supplies to critical projects such as Hinckley Point power station and the HS2 rail project, meaning that the 200 drivers could have secured a significant rise had Unite's "crack squad" not intervened.

The glorification of Graham and Unite by the *Daily Mirror* is directed against growing criticism of the union bureaucracy among workers, which intervenes to nip in the bud every manifestation of the class struggle. This has been expressed most sharply in the strike movement

building up across the national bus network, with bus workers hailed as heroes during the pandemic denied a pay increase which even keeps pace with inflation.

More than 20 pay disputes have broken out across the largest bus operator in the UK, Stagecoach, and this is now spreading to Arriva and First Bus. Graham stated on her election as general secretary that she would bring together all the union representatives on an industry-by-industry basis to address the main issues confronted by workers. No doubt a similar “crack unit” has been operating in the bus disputes. The product of this collaboration from the highest to local level has been to prevent national strike action, as huge mandates for strikes have been overturned and below inflation deals are dressed up as victories.

The latest example of the anger brewing among bus workers at Unite’s efforts on behalf of the corporations is at Arriva North West, after a second revised below inflation offer recommended by the union was voted down overwhelmingly.

In both road haulage and public transport, workers have suffered the consequences of deregulation, resulting in low pay, longer working hours and an absolute decline in their terms and conditions—which are real reasons for the major labour shortage facing both sectors.

What the corporate oligarchy fears most of all is the prospect of a generalised struggle to reverse decades of low pay and exploitation, which Unite and other trade unions sabotage at every turn. A few above inflation pay increases in particular economic hot-spots are the price paid to the union bureaucracy for its general role in damping down the flames of class conflict.

In line with its corporatist role, Unite has failed to mobilise any industrial action by its 50,000 members in road haulage to the Johnson government’s increase from 10 to 11 hours per day HGV drivers can be behind the wheel. What has been presented as one of Graham’s initiatives with grass roots activists is the “Trucked Off” campaign, which consisted of calling on drivers nationally to take their statutory meal break together on November 1.

Unite’s Drivers’ Manifesto, launched in late May, aims to win the backing of employers and the government for a national council to oversee collective bargaining arrangements for drivers, just 15 percent of whom are unionised. Deliberately vague on wage demands or reductions in maximum hours of work, its central purpose is to secure Unite’s role as an industrial police force imposing the dictates of the corporations.

Mirror article drew nothing but scorn. Then the Facebook page of the Professional Drivers Protest Group UK, an initiative by rank-and-file lorry drivers with a membership of more than 4,000 members. The group has organised a number of stay-at-home protests and issued a charter of demands, including a maximum 45 hour week and a minimum £15 an hour increase across the board.

Comments included:

“It’s got bugger all to do with the union. These companies are running scared that they will lose all their drivers on the run up to Christmas.”

“2.75% for cement workers! Wow”

“Yes that’s a fact these union’s are doing jack shit for drivers and taking the credit living off our backs.”

Graham, the self-proclaimed “Workers Candidate”, enjoys no genuine popular support in the working class. She emerged as victor in the August elections amid a mass abstention, receiving under 4 percent of the eligible vote.

The euphoria at her victory was confined to lower ranking union bureaucrats and pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), who claimed she would provide the basis for a militant turn within the union bureaucracy.

Commenting on the cottage industry of myth building that sprang up around Graham, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained:

“She is a careerist representative of the trade union bureaucracy responsible for the betrayals that left the working class unable to combat the more than three decades long offensive against jobs, wages, working and social conditions that have given rise to today’s staggering levels of social inequality. The political soap bubble of the “Workers Candidate” will not withstand its first contact with the harsh reality of the class struggle. This will confirm the SWP and SP’s position as servile courtiers of the union bureaucracy.”

That is how the record of Graham and her entourage should be judged, rather than the *Daily Mirror*’s transparent and pathetic fluff piece.



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