

# Go-Ahead drivers in London win support for petition against Unite collusion over Remote Sign On

Laura Tiernan  
2 December 2021

Drivers at Go-Ahead's Stockwell bus garage have started a petition warning the Unite union that any negotiations with the bus operator or Transport for London (TfL) over the introduction of Remote Sign On (RSO) will be viewed as "misrepresentation".

RSO is opposed by an overwhelming majority of bus drivers across London—84 percent according to a recent Unite survey. Bus companies plan to introduce it across the network to slash payroll costs and introduce full labour force "flexibility". Drivers will lose around 7 percent of annual pay through unpaid travel time that will lengthen the working week.

The drivers' petition states:

*We the undersigned members of Unite the union are against the implementation of Remote Sign On. Clause 9 (i) of the 1994 Operating Agreement states: 'A time allowance for travelling between garages and points of relief will be provided.'*

*We demand that Unite the union does not enter into any negotiations which may result in the alteration and/or removal of clause 9 (i) from the 1994 Operating Agreement or lead to the implementation of Remote Sign On.*

*Failure to execute our demands will be viewed as misrepresentation.*

The petition is circulating at Stockwell, with plans to gather signatures at other London General garages at Waterloo, Putney, Sutton, Merton, Northumberland Park and Waterside Way. The drivers also want to win support from their colleagues at Go-Ahead's London Central garages: Bexleyheath, Camberwell, Morden Wharf, New Cross and Peckham.

Stockwell drivers told the WSWS "take-up's been 100 percent". A driver explained, "There's been two types of feedback: 'if it's going to stop RSO then I'm signing it' and drivers who say they've come out of the union because they're disillusioned with it."

Go-Ahead drivers launched their petition after revelations that Unite took part in a confidential "risk assessment" exercise with TfL and bus operators over RSO's implementation. The leaked document was featured in a WSWS article, "Unite's fake campaign against London buses Remote Sign On".

Drivers say they are not prepared to accept Unite's backroom deals with the bus companies. They believe the companies' plans for RSO across London are far advanced. A Stockwell driver told the WSWS, "We need to stop waiting for someone else to do

things for us. If drivers are bothered by this thing, then let's get up and do something."

In May this year, Unite cancelled industrial action against RSO despite overwhelming strike mandates by 4,000 drivers at Metroline West and Metroline Travel. Unite's Mary Summers claimed the strikes' cancellation was a "victory" after London Mayor Sadiq Khan agreed a "moratorium" on RSO until the end of 2022. Khan later declared that no such moratorium existed.

Unite sought to defuse workers' opposition to RSO, retailing Khan's promise of an "independent study" over the summer into the effects of RSO, with results presented to "stakeholders" (not drivers) by winter. The entire charade is aimed at providing the appearance of "consultation", with Unite offering a fig leaf of risk assessment "input". The WSWS contacted Unite yesterday to ask whether it had received a copy of TfL's report. No reply was forthcoming, either from Unite or the office of London Mayor Sadiq Khan.

Last week, WSWS spoke with a Go-Ahead driver who started the petition at Stockwell. The garage is one of the largest in London, with around 600 drivers. It was the subject of a 2015 ITV documentary "The Secret Life of a Bus Garage" which conveyed the camaraderie and life experiences of some of its most senior drivers, cleaners and other valued staff members. Driver X explained the background and aims of the petition. His name has been withheld to protect against reprisals.

**WSWS:** Can you explain how the petition came about?

**Driver X:** One evening at work I was having a conversation with a night controller via the radio, and he just made a throwaway comment that "remote sign on is already here, so there's no point arguing on that."

It was at that moment that I literally just went, "No way, the drivers have got to do something rather than waiting for Unite". Personally, I wasn't seeing what I consider enough action or education or campaigning against it from Unite. Just a couple of posters up in the garage and some smaller business cards that you could sign the back of saying that you're against remote sign on.

I decided, let's start the petition, have a look at the operating agreement, find the clause that specifies what travelling time will be given, and basically start taking some action.

**WSWS:** Can you explain the issue of travelling time and how this relates to remote sign-on?

**Driver X:** At the moment we start our shifts at the garages. You sign on and you're paid to travel to where you take over the bus, unless you take the bus out of the garage. Remote sign on would mean you don't go to the garage, so you don't start getting paid until you get to the place where your bus is.

What we'd be losing is time, because we would have to travel in our own time, unpaid. We'll be spending longer out of our houses travelling for work, doing more driving for the same money, and this is possibly going to lead to increasing fatigue which is a massive thing in the industry.

There's a lady called Sarah Hope. A few years ago, her mother and her young daughter got hit by a bus very, very, badly—and a lot of it was put down to [driver] fatigue. Remote sign on is going to lengthen our days and goes against everything they've supposedly been working towards. We were balloted on driver fatigue in 2019, then the pandemic hit.

A strike would have been absolutely justified, but we did have to think of National Health Service and critical care workers who were relying on us to get to work. I'm sure most garages in London have lost drivers to COVID as a result of their sacrifice to keep the service running for other key workers. And although drivers' cabs were mostly sealed, we still had to travel to and from work using the same public transport, exposing us to increased risk of infection.

**WSWS:** Bearing in mind that a lot of drivers can't afford to live near many of the garages in central London, how much time could RSO add to the working day?

**DriverX:** We have drivers who live everywhere. Some of them travel down to London and stay with family while they work—they do three days and then travel back up. We've got one guy who lives in Margate and travels up and down every day. In a sense, to him, the amount of travelling he does, it's not going to make a lot of difference. But if you've got a guy who lives an hour away on one side of the garage and the changeover point is a half hour on the other side, then obviously he's got an extra half hour each way on his day. So, it does depend a lot on where the driver lives.

**WSWS:** What sort of hours are being worked at the moment, especially with the driver shortage?

**DriverX:** Our hours haven't really changed because it's all governed by the operating agreement. The company does have a couple of what they call "high earners" at Stockwell—they're high *hours* rather than high *earning*, because you get paid basic money for all the hours you do. Our breaks are unpaid, so if we do 38 hours at work, you then add your breaks onto that. So even if it was only an hour break every day, which is unlikely because it's usually a lot more, you'll be looking at 43 hours a week at least, plus travelling time.

**WSWS:** When did you start circulating the petition and what has been the response?

**Driver X:** It would have been about the beginning of November. It's been good. The drivers that I've seen, who are members of Unite, have been happy to sign, because obviously they're worried about remote sign on and they're just glad to try and do something to stop it. A lot more drivers have said 'No I came out of Unite because I'm not seeing anything from them.' One of the hardest parts about getting it circulated is that we all work different shifts.

I tend to see the same drivers, week in and week out. So there's a couple of people circulating it with me, just to try and spread it over the different shifts. But take-up's been 100 percent.

**WSWS:** You've seen the TfL document with feedback from Unite on the implementation of RSO. When you saw that, what were your thoughts?

**DriverX:** The most telling part for me is that there is no mention of the financial gains for the companies, because we're talking millions of pounds a year in travelling time.

**WSWS:** TfL's document was leaked by drivers to the WSWS, and we published an article about it. What was the response to that article?

**DriverX:** It went out on the WhatsApp group [at Stockwell garage] and a few different people showed it to me. A driver went to the Unite rep with the article to question him and asked, 'What is this [confidential TfL document] all about?' The rep phoned one of our conveners who promptly denied the document and said, 'No it's a load of garbage, they must've created it themselves'.

**WSWS:** They were claiming we forged it? You're talking about the article, "Unite's fake campaign against Remote Sign On" which included a photocopy of the leaked document marked 'TfL confidential'?

**Driver X:** That's right, yes. At the same time, there's a lot of drivers who are resigned that there's nothing they can do about it. It just shows they are used to losing conditions and benefits. A lot of drivers are also under such financial pressure that they're worried about losing pay and the companies know that we all rely on overtime to pay our bills. But the companies are scared of the drivers standing together. That's why it's important to realise the power we have.

**Go Ahead drivers in London who would like to circulate the petition against RSO at their garage are invited to contact Stockwell drivers at: [stockwellrankandfile@gmail.com](mailto:stockwellrankandfile@gmail.com)**



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**