

London United bus drivers reject derisory 2.5 percent final pay offer

Tony Robson
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Bus drivers at London United have overwhelmingly rejected a derisory pay offer of just 2.5 percent by a majority of 88 percent.

The claim that this is the only affordable offer is understood by bus workers as a lie. London United is part of RATP Dev, the international arm of the RATP Group, the French owned transnational transport company with annual revenues of €5.5 billion, employing 63,000 workers across its global operations. RATP Group has boasted of a bounce back for the first half of 2021 and has stated that positive net profits were comparable with pre-pandemic levels. The Group's share of net profits reached €105 million, a €193 million increase compared to June 2020, with net profits from subsidiaries having grown by €39 million.

The pay offer for 2021/22 is less than half the current rate of inflation measured by CPI, standing at 5.4 percent, and only one third of the more accurate RPI measurement (which includes housing costs) of 7.5 percent. The pay award for 2022/23 is pegged to the lower inflation rate plus 0.5 percent, subject to a minimum of 1.5 percent and a maximum of 2.5 percent.

Bus workers at the seven garages across West and South West London who are members of the Unite union rejected the ultimatum, with just 110 votes in favour and 832 against in the ballot organised January 19.

The fact that the first year of the two-year pay award has almost expired is itself an indictment of Unite, which continues to sit on opposition. In its letter to members on January 7, Unite stated that it had informed the company “it was not attractive enough as a ‘Two year deal’”. Its only criticism is that the second year of the award should not have a maximum set at 2.5 but it does not oppose the CPI criteria. This exposes the fraud that Unite bases pay claims on the RPI rate and

the hollow talk of General Secretary Sharon Graham that Unite rejected the “undercutting CPI measure” as inflation soars, gutting workers living standards.

Last year Unite ended a pay strike at London United based on a 2.25 percent pay agreement and a £400 lump sum for the previous two years, having enforced a pay freeze since 2019. The union recommended deal was accepted on a narrow margin of 696 votes for and 639 votes against. Major garages in west London such as Stamford Brook, Park Royal and Shepherds Bush voted down the deal overwhelmingly.

The strike last year from February across RATP Dev at its three London subsidiaries by 2,000 drivers was the first action anywhere across the bus network in the UK since the start of the pandemic.

Bus workers condemned the original pay proposals by RATP Dev, contrasting the 7 pence hourly proposed increase to the pay-out to CEOs and shareholders, with large turnouts on picket lines. One RATP Dev driver told the WSWs “This is just the spark of a broader fight.”

With Unite unable to prevent strike action, its posture of opposition was to ensure that the union bureaucracy kept its grip on the dispute to suppress London-wide action over the attack on pay, terms and conditions.

Unite had overturned a strike mandate by bus drivers at Metroline the previous October against the plans to introduce Remote Sign On which would slash pay, lengthen working hours and increase driver fatigue. Metroline ran additional bus services in West London to undermine the strike at RATP Dev, showing that private operators were prepared to close ranks against workers opposition in contrast to Unite’s isolation of the struggle.

The union’s actions were to pre-empt a strike movement which would undermine its relations

established through the Tripartite Agreements with the private operators and Transport for London to prioritise their profits over workers lives since the start of the pandemic. The second wave of the pandemic had already led to the sacrifice of more bus drivers' lives in the capital, reaching a death toll of 59 by February. Unite conspired with Metroline against action in January fought for by bus driver David O'Sullivan at Cricklewood to have him unfairly dismissed for calling on workers to invoke Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act to enforce safety against the official cover-up of infections and deaths.

A central part of Unite's efforts to derail workers' opposition at RATP Dev was the promotion of a sectional and nationalist outlook. The union produced an advert claiming that the problem was foreign ownership and that French bus workers were treated favourably compared with those in the UK. This was at a time when RATP drivers in France were taking action over safety violations by the company regarding COVID-19.

The action at RATP Dev was also kept separate from the struggle by bus workers nationally against UK owned private bus operators, with Stagecoach demanding wage restraint of 1 percent after pay freezes in 2020 and Go Ahead imposing a fire and rehire contract slashing pay and sick pay, which led to the 11 week strike by Manchester drivers at its Go North West operations that ended in a bitter sellout.

These divisions were reinforced even within RATP Dev in London, as it wound down the rolling strike action across the three subsidiaries to agree separate deals. The so-called "line in the sand" declared by regional officer Michelle Braveboy ended in a 1 percent increase for the lowest paid drivers at Quality Line, 1.25 percent at London Sovereign and 2.25 percent at London United.

Braveboy declared at the end of last year's dispute, "It is hoped that this deal will mark a new start in industrial relations with RATP." It certainly did in terms of the collusion between Unite and the company. Driver shortages produced by infections and isolation and workers leaving because of low pay and exploitative conditions has been met with an open season on terms and conditions. Drivers at the Park Royal garage in West London have reported to the WSWS constant changes to scheduling, with working

hours increased to 40 per week and up to 13 days consecutive working days followed by one day off. Standing time is being included in break times and drivers can receive as little as 35-minute meal breaks.

Even after London United drivers have emphatically rejected the company's final offer, Unite has not started balloting for strike action. Drivers have been informed of another meeting between the union and company on February 13. Across the country the Graham bureaucracy is trying to hold back a tide of opposition with the sellout of the strike on Stagecoach Yorkshire and the isolation of the strike action by First Manchester .

A bus driver at Park Royal who voted to reject the final offer from London United spoke in support of the call by the London Bus Rank and File committee for independent action against the union's collusion and a unified fightback:

"Last year's strike was such a big disappointment. We took ten days of strike action and all I got was a 33-pence an hour increase. The union made us look stupid in front of the company. We were told by Unite that it would be followed up by a bigger pay increase next time. I did not agree with how it divided Quality Line, London Sovereign and London United. We are all bus drivers under the same company umbrella.

"The company must think we are stupid saying they have not got the money. Of course they have, or why would they be in business? We are the ones who have been making the profits, but RATP managing director for London got a 54 percent increase in her salary. That is probably in return for the changes to all our terms and conditions.

"We should be combining our struggles as bus workers. It is not an issue of which company you work for. We've all been through the pandemic together. We know how bad it is in London, but how many drivers or transport workers lives have been lost across the country? We don't know. The companies should be held responsible and be made to pay us all a living wage."



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