

Reject Arriva-Unite's 3 percent pay offer in London South: Build a rank-and-file committee for a unified fightback!

Tony Robson
21 March 2022

Bus drivers at Arriva London South should oppose the sell-out deal drawn up behind their backs to end their pay fight before it has even begun.

Last Friday, Unite the union suspended strike action to ballot over a revised pay offer only slightly above the miserly 1.5 percent originally tabled. The first round of strikes, due to begin yesterday, were cancelled after “last minute negotiations”.

Unite hailed an “improved offer” but has refused to disclose the details. According to drivers it involves a 3 percent increase, less than half the current rate of inflation standing at 7.8 per cent RPI. Around 1,000 drivers at four garages—Brixton, Norwood, Thornton Heath and Croydon—voted to strike by a 95 percent majority.

Unite regional officer John Murphy, serving as a de facto mouthpiece for the company, claimed, “Once Arriva understood the strength of feeling among the drivers, they returned to the negotiating table and made an improved offer.”

This is tacit endorsement of a de facto pay cut. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has said nothing, after describing the original 1.5 percent offer as “pathetic.”

Unite's strike cancellation followed Arriva London South's provocative legal challenge stopping bus drivers at Brixton garage from joining the planned industrial action. A notice from the company on March 16 claimed the strike vote there did not meet “legal requirements.” Far from challenging this, Unite has rolled over, bolstering the company's intimidation tactics.

Unite is once again overturning strike action to impose a below inflation agreement. Without even

submitting its own pay claim, the union has recycled the 3 percent settlement it imposed last November at Arriva North West. This was below inflation then and more so now. Unite enforced it after twice suspending strike action by 1,800 bus drivers, issuing a joint statement with the company and the GMB union urging acceptance.

At Brixton garage on Saturday, drivers opposed to the revised offer spoke with WSWs reporters. One said, “We have the power, without us the buses won't run. They have offered us 1.5 percent and then 3 percent which is in fact a pay cut. The union has chairs at the company table, so won't go against the company as they would be going against themselves. The finances of the unions are tied up with the stock markets. If workers go on strike, the stock market goes down, they lose out. That is why they don't want workers to go out on strike.”

Another driver said, “There is a deep-seated anger at Unite here in the garage. They have an arrangement with the company. They are the only union recognised and we are supposed to trust Unite. How can that be legal? There is always money for war but not for teachers or nurses.”

Those rejecting the revised offer and defending the mandate for strike action to pursue a genuine pay rise must take the next step. There will be no fight against Arriva unless workers take the struggle out of the hands of Unite.

The same is true at London United. Around 1,000 bus drivers voted to strike by more than 90 percent after rejecting a 2.5 percent pay offer in early February. Drivers at seven garages in west and south-west London have rejected a further revised offer of 3.1

percent, but no dates have been set for action over a two year pay award starting from 2021. Unite is playing divide-and-rule in preventing London-wide action.

The only votes Unite respects are those accepting below inflation deals, brought about by suspending strike action through an endless process of re-balloting.

The suspension of the one-day stoppage on Arriva London South came the day after the firing of 800 ferry crew by P&O Ferries, enforced by a private security operation to frog march workers off the ships and their immediate replacement with a scab workforce.

Unite has not mobilised any opposition to this corporate thuggery. Its response was a feeble call for P&O to “step back.” Bobby Morton, Unite national officer for the docks and maritime industry, drove a wedge between its 160 members and the seafaring crew by offering to work with the company. “While Unite’s members are not swept up in this announcement, this move will bring uncertainty to all P&O workers. We urge the company to step back from this drastic, cost-cutting measure and work with all the P&O unions to save jobs.”

Citing the need to “Take action,” Graham tweeted, “I have instructed £10 million to be allocated to a new campaign fund. If any employer attacks my members in a similar way, then no action will be ruled out.”

This confirms that Graham’s talk of solidarity with P&O workers is hot air. The on-the-spot sacking of 800 workers is not deemed by Unite as an attack on every single worker at P&O Ferries and beyond. There is no “action” proposed by Unite among its shoreside members, which would disrupt the scabbing operation being organised by P&O.

As for the claim that Unite will not tolerate similar attacks by employers, its own record in the bitter pay dispute by Coventry bin workers proves the opposite. The union has organised no solidarity action to defend 70 refuse drivers against the orchestrated strike breaking conducted by the Labour authority since January 31. Graham ran to the government arbitration body, ACAS, which has upheld the pay freeze. Unite continues the isolation of the strike based on pathetic calls for Labour to “do the right thing.”

The only unofficial action sanctioned by Unite is when it involves trying to line up the working class behind the Johnson government and its proxy war

against Russia, through the boycott on the docks against Russian oil and gas. When it comes to stopping a scabbing operation organised by Starmer’s Labour Party, the union rigorously upholds anti-strike legislation against solidarity action.

Workers are facing a sustained assault on their right to organise and strike over pay and conditions through a state clampdown in the UK and internationally. A revised High Court ruling maintained draconian restrictions against the six-week strike by outsourced NHS staff at Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital in London. The 33 security guards fighting against inferior pay and terms are outlawed from protesting within 50 metres of the hospital, backed up with threats of fines and imprisonment.

The working class must free its struggles from the grip of the trade unions and Labour Party, which stand on the opposite side of the class divide. Arriva London South drivers should form a rank-and-file committee to reach out to colleagues at London United and begin a co-ordinated fight across the capital by more than 20,000 bus workers.

The fight for improved pay should be linked with opposition to the sweatshop conditions being policed by Unite throughout transport, logistics and manufacturing and a broader fightback against brutal restructuring and cost cutting across Transport for London. This is the perspective outlined in the Socialist Equality Party statement “For united action by London Underground, bus and transport workers to defeat Tory/Labour cuts. Money for transport and essential services not war!”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact