

Arriva London South bus drivers mount two-day strike over pay

Tony Robson
28 March 2022

Arriva London South bus drivers began a two-day strike yesterday, rejecting a de facto pay cut of 3 percent offered in negotiations over an outstanding award for 2021.

Bus drivers are having to fight last year's pay battle under conditions in which inflation this year has climbed to a 30 year high, with CPI at 6.2 percent and RPI at 8.2 percent. This is a measure of how Unite has suppressed a long overdue fight, leaving workers without *any* pay rise during the pandemic.

The growing resistance of bus drivers has been met with repressive actions by Arriva UK Bus and provoked a crisis for Unite in its ongoing attempts to demobilise workers' opposition.

Around a thousand members of Unite voted by 98 percent to reject the original management offer of 1.5 percent at the four bus garages in south London Brixton, Norwood, Thornton Heath and Croydon.

The company responded with a legal challenge on March 16 barring drivers at Brixton from striking, claiming the ballot at the garage did not meet "legal requirements". Unite did not challenge this attack, made by using a minor technicality. It focussed its attention on working more closely with Arriva to prevent the strike altogether. The union cancelled the first stage of strike action, a one-day stoppage due March 21, across all garages to table the revised offer of 3 percent.

The offer was rejected across Arriva London South by a majority of 58 percent with 320 voting for and 480 against.

In calling for a "No" vote, the WSWs drew attention to the fact that Unite had taken the 3 percent settlement last year at Arriva North West as its own marker. This was only pushed through after the union twice suspended strike action and produced a joint statement

with management calling for workers to accept.

Faced with the rejection of its proposed agreement with management at Arriva London South, Unite is attempting to save face to maintain control of the dispute.

Regional Officer John Murphy said prior to the vote, "Once Arriva understood the strength of feeling among the drivers, they returned to the negotiating table and made an improved offer." Following the vote to reject, Murphy now states that the company "has shown its contempt to a loyal workforce by trying to palm them off with an entirely unacceptable offer."

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham maintained a stony silence on the revised offer, but following the vote said, "Arriva's bus drivers are fed up with being taken for granted... Our members at Arriva will have the union's total support until the company makes a fair offer and this dispute is resolved."

Bus workers are not only "fed up" with Arriva but with Unite, which they view as working on behalf of the company. Reality is catching up with Graham's claims to have won a string of pay victories, rather than the below inflation deals that have followed Unite's blocking national strike action at Stagecoach and further action on Arriva UK Bus.

Just how despicable Unite's role is in the Arriva dispute is exemplified by the actions of a union steward at Croydon garage, who openly called for strike breaking. His citing as a pretext the garage voting to accept the revised offer to repudiate the collective vote is consistent with the role Unite has played in dividing workers garage by garage.

His circular to union members does not appear on Unite headed paper but bares the official stamp from Unite. The letter from "Preston: Steward LE491" states,

“Back on 22 November 2021, your negotiation committee stated they would be satisfied with a 3 per cent offer, if it were made. Now that the employer has acceded to that demand it seems that there has been an agenda to wreck it in some quarters.”

He adds “Technically the strike is still on... However, you do not have to strike. The employer has offered us what we asked for as regards 2021.”

This makes clear that Unite was fully committed to a deal which was even below inflation in autumn of last year and that its rejection by drivers is viewed as an act of sabotage.

The attempt at union-sanctioned scabbing met with determined opposition, with a large turn out on the Croydon picket line as there has been at Norwood and Thornton Heath garages. According to reports from Transport for London (TfL) by 3.00pm yesterday afternoon out of 345 buses at the three garages only 20 were on the road.

Unite has issued no statement calling for the removal of the steward from his position for advocating strike-breaking. The union bureaucracy has been preoccupied instead with trying to cover its exposed rear end.

This was the purpose of Peter Kavanagh, Unite London and Eastern Regional Secretary’s appearance on the picket line outside Thornton Heath garage.

While claiming that Unite stood with Arriva London South drivers, Kavanagh continued to present the 3 percent revised offer in a favourable light—higher than any other offer across London buses for 2021. Rather than denoting a concession from Arriva, Kavanagh only confirms how Unite has betrayed the basic interests of over 20,000 bus workers in the capital.

Kavanagh’s address managed to cram in numerous lies in under five minutes.

- The 3 percent offer was above inflation for 2021, when even the lower rate of CPI inflation rose over the 12 months to the end of last year by more than 5 percent.

- The reason for the lack of strike action was the failure of bus drivers turning out to vote in large enough numbers in industrial ballots. Unite ditched a strike mandate in a consultation ballot London wide against driver fatigue at the start of the pandemic. It has cancelled strike action twice against Remote Sign On at Metroline, and is currently sitting on a live strike mandate since early February at London United, not to

mention the stand taken by Arriva London South drivers.

- During his praise of keys workers, Kavanagh twice wrongly “corrected” a striker who shouted out that the pandemic had claimed the lives of 54 bus drivers, claiming that 51 had died.

This undercount of the death toll of London bus drivers from COVID-19 adds insult to injury. It is based on a continued cover up over Unite’s role in partnership with the Labour Mayor, TfL and the private operators in putting profits before lives as all public health measures are ended completely by April 1.

The latest figures obtained from TfL by the WSWS in the last fortnight show that a total of 60 bus drivers have died from COVID-19 out of 75 bus workers, among 105 deaths of TfL workers overall.

Nothing that comes out of the mouths of the Unite bureaucracy is not aimed at concealing the truth, blaming the working class and justifying the union’s continued collaboration with the employers.

There is a growing sense among workers that they are all in the firing line of a ruling elite that is criminally irresponsible and unaccountable, and has nothing to offer other than an unending pandemic, poverty wages, austerity and war.

Whether it is to defend their livelihoods or even their lives, workers must free their struggles from Unite and all the pro-business unions through the building of a rank-and-file network to break down the sectional boundaries policed by the mouthpieces of management and wage a unified fightback.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact