

Arriva London South bus drivers' strike becomes focus of broader opposition

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The strike by hundreds of bus drivers at Arriva London South on Monday and Tuesday was welcomed by other drivers seeking to oppose pay restraint by employers and the Johnson government as living standards plummet.

The picket lines at the south London garages in Norwood, Thornton Heath and Croydon saw a large turnout and a jubilant atmosphere among drivers feeling that a long overdue fightback was underway. Dozens of strikers blocked the main entrances to depots, with chants of "What do we want? Pay rise! When do we want it? Now!"

Carrying out the strike was no small achievement. Unite the union is committed to ensuring that industrial action they are unable to prevent is isolated. The list of strikes suspended and cancelled continues to expand. If it were not for the trade unions, the cost-of-living crisis fuelled by thirty-year high inflation of 8.2 percent would already have resulted in a strike wave across all sectors of the economy.

Arriva London South would have been another cancelled strike but for the fact that bus drivers rejected a 3 percent revised offer from the company for their 2021 pay award, which Unite attempted to impose in an underhand manner.

The union suspended the first stage of strike action, a one-day stoppage the previous week, after last ditch talks with the company and balloted for Arriva's "improved offer". This was rejected by a 58 percent majority across the garages. The "No" vote would have been higher without the positive spin Unite put on the revised offer by comparing it to the insulting 1.5 percent originally tabled by the company.

In Croydon, where there was a large turnout on the picket line, a Unite steward had called on members to break the strike stating that the 3 percent offer was in

fact the official position of the union negotiating committee.

Bus drivers at Brixton were among the four garages that voted by a 95 percent majority for strike action but were barred from participating as a result of a legal challenge mounted by Arriva. The basis for the legal action remains shrouded in mystery because Unite has not clarified the situation or mounted any challenge.

WSWS reporters were told by Brixton drivers that the challenge was based on a technicality. The union is now forcing a re-ballot over industrial action at the garage. Some drivers complained of sabotage by Unite, pointing out that the participation of Brixton garage would have had a much greater impact as their routes run into central London.

The WSWS published two articles this week on the dispute having called earlier for a rejection of the 3 percent offer in "Arriva London South bus drivers mount two-day strike over pay" and "Brixton drivers fury at anti-strike injunction: 'The union is in cahoots with management."

The articles have been widely read and circulated among workers seeking a means to fight and oppose the sabotage of the union bureaucracy. They have been read thousands of times directly on the *World Socialist Web Site* and viewed 12,000 times on the NHS FightBack Facebook page, gaining 135 likes and 50 shares. They have been widely followed on the main Facebook groups used by London bus drivers, who posted the following comments:

- "All bus drivers should strike."
- "TFL need to be accountable for this. They need to have a department which investigates privatised companies like they monitor lost mileage. Union needs to be kicked out and a new approach needs to be made."

- “Like every garage, union work with management.”

- “I went through 7 months chemo, followed by 6 months shielding, then put on furlough and abandoned for 5 months while Arriva constructed a sham redundancy for me. HR and managers lied, changed the process without consulting and failed to follow the company redundancy policy. Unite didn’t want to know.”

- “Unite are with management all the way, corrupt.”

No further dates for strike action have been announced by Unite. It is sitting on a live strike mandate by around 1,000 drivers at London United from early February, after the rejection of a 2.5 percent and then 3.1 percent offer. Once again Unite is blocking action across the capital by its 20,000 bus workers.

The danger posed to the fight of Arriva bus drivers is shown by Unite’s enforced derisory 3 percent pay awards last November at Arriva North West, after twice suspending strike action, and at Arriva Wales to end an all-out strike on its fifth day. These pay deals have been so low that Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has not been able to include the settlements in her falsely packaged list of “pay victories” on the buses at Stagecoach, used by Unite to justify demobilising a national strike.

Unite London and Eastern Regional Secretary Peter Kavanagh delivered a tub-thumping speech to striking drivers at Thornton Heath on Monday. He continued to glorify the 3 percent offer, claiming that it was better than anywhere else in London for 2021 and the result of “tough bargaining” by the union. At no stage did he condemn the legal action taken by the company against Brixton drivers. So much for solidarity and unity.

The central message was that Arriva drivers were on their own as he claimed that London bus drivers have not in the past turned out to vote for strike action. Kavanagh knows that this is a lie. Unite has repeatedly cancelled strike action despite large mandates over the last two years on behalf of the Labour Mayor, Transport for London and the private operators.

Kavanagh’s contempt for bus drivers was typified when he rounded on a striker who shouted out not to forget the 54 London bus drivers whose lives had been taken by COVID-19. Kavanagh “corrected” this twice stating, “I thought it was 51.” The accepted figure as far back as October last year was 54. The total now is 60

drivers dead and 75 bus workers, Transport for London admits. Unite and the other unions have suppressed all opposition to the Johnson government’s overturning public health measures as infection levels spike and deaths mount once again with the Omicron BA.2 variant.

The two-day strike on London Underground at the beginning of March has emboldened transport workers in the public and private sector to seek a unified fightback and collective strike action across the sectional divide maintained by Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union. This sentiment can only find an organised expression through the establishment of rank-and-file committees which mobilise the working class in opposition to the Johnson government and London Mayor Sadiq Khan, who serve the interests of the corporations and the financial elite in the City of London.

Workers are in the fight of their lives against the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and a rapidly expanding proxy war led by NATO against Russia in Ukraine. The growth of militant opposition requires an alternative political perspective which challenges the framework of capitalism and the toll the pursuit of profits is extracting from society. This perspective is outlined in the Socialist Equality Party statement, “For united action by London Underground, bus and rail workers to defeat Tory-Labour cuts! Money for transport and essential services, not war!”



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