

Brixton bus garage strike re-ballot as Unite kicks Arriva South London pay dispute into the long grass

Laura Tiernan
6 April 2022

Bus drivers at Brixton garage are being re-balloted for strike action over a miserly 3 percent pay offer from Arriva South London, with voting due to close April 25. The pay deal has already been rejected by drivers across Arriva South London, who struck last week for 48 hours.

Brixton drivers were barred from taking part in last week's strike that saw Croydon, Thornton Heath and Norwood garages halt services on March 28-29. It was the second time drivers had rejected a below-inflation pay offer. Arriva had earlier offered just 1.5 percent.

A notice issued by Arriva on March 16 declared Brixton's strike would not proceed due to legal action by the company. Nick Bland, Operations Manager at Arriva South London, wrote, "the ballot carried out at Brixton did not meet the legal requirements for industrial action, and for this reason the company have raised a legal challenge. **As a consequence, Brixton garage will not be eligible to take part in this forthcoming action** [emphasis in original]."

Bland instructed, "All staff are therefore asked to follow their normal duty patterns on the planned/days until advised differently." No further advice followed. Drivers were therefore led to believe their strike had been cancelled due to a successful court injunction obtained by the company.

Between March 16 and March 29, Unite provided no information to drivers about what "legal requirements" its strike ballot had allegedly failed to meet. As other garages struck last Monday and Tuesday, anger spilled over, with Brixton drivers denouncing Unite for keeping them in the dark.

Unite regional officer Peter Kavanagh was forced into damage control. Following the strike, he issued written

notice to Unite members at Brixton announcing a new strike ballot. He claimed Unite was keen to see Brixton joining the action "if further stoppages are necessary in your pay dispute".

For the first time, Kavanagh gave details about why Unite "was not able to call you out in this week's strikes". He wrote of an accidental "omission in the paperwork issued to Arriva in respect of Brixton—the date the ballot was opening was not included in the letter to the company".

Kavanagh explained, "Arriva knew full well the opening date of the ballot, as they had received this in the letters for the three other garages" but he stressed, "the anti-union laws in the UK are among the harshest in the developed world and we were advised that this small administrative omission was sufficient for their Lawyers to injunct the union should we have proceeded."

Unite refused as always to challenge the anti-strike laws. Instead of fighting Arriva's threats of a court injunction and mobilising its members, the union caved in. This meant hobbling the strike, removing the garage with the largest number of routes crossing the Thames into London's central business district.

Unite has a track record of balloting irregularities that accidentally provide a pretext for legal action by bus companies. In October 2020, a 97 percent strike mandate at Metrolink against Remote Sign On was cancelled in similar circumstances.

Prior to the strike, the *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Arriva to confirm the basis of its legal action at Brixton. Assuming an injunction had been granted, we asked 1) On what basis was the injunction sought? 2) On what legal basis was it granted? 3) Who granted

the injunction and on what date? 4) Has Unite appealed the injunction?

Arriva failed to answer our questions, or to correct the false impression left by their March 16 notice to drivers. Transport for London's press office told our reporter it was a matter for Arriva and that TfL could not comment.

On Monday, a week after the strike, WSWS received the following reply from Arriva's Head of Marketing (UK Bus) Lisa Pearson confirming that no injunction had been obtained and that Unite voluntarily withdrew strike action at Brixton:

"We can confirm Arriva has not taken an injunction out and Unite withdrew the notification for strike action at Brixton. We remain committed to continued dialogue to resolve the pay claim for last year."

Arriva's email was forwarded by WSWS to drivers who shared it across social media, provoking a wave of indignation. Many drivers said if the information was correct they would resign from the union. Others denounced Unite as a company union, describing it as "rubbish" and "in Arriva's pocket".

Unite's refusal to challenge Arriva's threats at Brixton is of a piece with its pro-company strategy throughout the dispute. With inflation heading rapidly towards 10 percent, its highest in 40 years, Unite officials led by General Secretary Sharon Graham continue to foist below-inflation pay deals on workers.

While drivers have rejected Arriva's latest 3 percent offer, Peter Kavanagh openly praised it, telling drivers last week that "3 percent is the highest offer in London buses this year" achieved through the union's "tough negotiations".

Arriva has cried poverty, citing the pandemic. But global transport giant Deutsche Bahn Group, which owns Arriva, saw revenues rise by 18.4 percent to €47.3 billion in 2021. DB Group CEO Richard Lutz voted himself a 10 percent pay rise for 2023 and will take home €1 million, with two more DB Group executives awarding themselves a 10 percent pay increase.

Unite has issued no further updates on the progress of pay talks. But drivers have pointed out that Brixton's re-ballot runs to April 25, with two more weeks' notice needed for any action following a strike vote. This means it will be six weeks before all four garages can strike together even if one is called. Unite has kicked

the dispute into the long grass and will try to enforce either 3 percent or the lowest possible increase on 3 percent while inflation soars.

Following news of Unite's action at Brixton, a petition was launched yesterday calling on Sharon Graham to sack regional bus officials Kavanagh and John Murphy. It has so far gathered 136 signatures. But its appeal to Graham to sweep away corruption or "incompetence" in the lower ranks of the union bureaucracy she heads is a political fantasy. Nothing that happened at Brixton, involving a high-profile strike in the capital, would have been done without the full knowledge of Graham and of the national executive.

Today's trade unions are "unions" in name only that protect the profits of the bus companies and their shareholders. Such corporatist, pro-company organisations cannot be reformed.

The pay battle at Arriva is part of a growing wave of strikes in the UK, across Europe and internationally against rampant inflation pushing millions of workers into poverty, hardship and struggle.

Last month's strikes on the London Underground show the conditions exist for united action, but Unite, Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and train drivers' union ASLEF are collaborating with the Johnson government and Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan to suppress workers' action, dividing workers company-by-company and garage-by-garage while historic cuts are rammed through against transport workers and passengers.

Workers must rely on their own strength and create new organisations of class struggle—rank-and-file strike committees to organise a genuine fightback.

Economic and social life must be reorganised in the interests of the working-class majority's needs. The major transport companies and banks must be placed under public ownership and their profits seized to fund the National Health Service, education, transport and other urgent social necessities.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact