

London bus drivers speak on Arriva South pay dispute: “The union is useless”

Our reporters
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Drivers from Arriva South London buses spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the current pay dispute encompassing four garages in South London: Brixton, Croydon, Norwood and Thornton Heath.

Unite the union is trying to push through a below inflation pay claim for 2021. The 2022 pay claim is also being effectively delayed—a measure that places the burden of inflation onto drivers rather than Arriva’s shareholders.

Last Thursday, Unite confirmed it has defied its members, submitting a claim for just 3 percent plus a £750 lump sum in pay talks that resumed last week. Arriva South drivers already rejected Arriva’s 3 percent pay offer in a ballot last month.

During a campaign at Brixton on Saturday, drivers spoke with David O’Sullivan, a member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

They spoke angrily against Unite’s efforts to sabotage the dispute, including blocking strike action at Brixton garage. The drivers are currently being re-balloted for strike action.

“Unite is Arriva,” was the view of one Brixton driver. Another said, “I don’t trust the union ... they’re only in it for the money.” She pointed out that Brixton garage has several routes which go into Central London, saying, “This is why the union didn’t want us to go out on strike.”

Asked how he felt about Brixton being blocked from joining strike action with other garages a fortnight ago, another driver said, “It’s bollocks... The union is useless.”

One driver expressed disbelief at the union’s supposed mistake in forgetting to put the date on the strike paperwork, saying, “How is it possible that an organisation of professionals with a lot of experience can forget to fill in a date on a form?”

Another said, “I was fuming the last day of the strike when we didn’t get to go out!”

“It’s sabotage,” another driver chimed in, “The unions have shares in the company... there’s a definite conflict of interest.” He responded warmly to O’Sullivan’s discussion about the need for a rank-and-file committee independent of Unite, “I agree with everything you’re saying.”

Another added, “A lot of the reps get really comfortable with the perks of the job, and they forget the passionate side of it. They lied about the injunction. It’s disgusting. I’m very disappointed. I haven’t been working like I’d normally work.

“I think the situation in the industry is bad. One, with the PPE. And the wages that we’re dealing with are from last year. We’ve worked all the way through COVID; the PPE was slow to come in the first place; we’ve lost bus drivers. Family members have died. You’ve got to remember we’re going home to our family members with whatever we’ve got.”

O’Sullivan explained his victimisation by Metroline at Cricklewood for defending his colleagues’ health and safety during the pandemic and the fact the union gave evidence against him. The driver responded, “That sounds about right. They’ll only defend workers when it suits them. There’s a lot that they’re silent on, even outside of COVID.

“We have buses which aren’t fit for purpose. There’s no heating, for example, in winter. It doesn’t seem to change. Why should we drive cold? It’s just the basic principles of making the bus fit for use. If there are no drivers, no-one gets paid. But they put us at the bottom of the tree.

“It says on my license that I drive a ‘passenger-carrying vehicle.’ So my concern is not for you [Arriva management] or your bonus, or for TfL’s money, it’s

for the passengers... That's the problem with private companies. For me, I don't like it. I went into this job because I like to drive. But I get why customers are frustrated."

Another driver from Brixton told WSWs, "It is a disgrace what Unite has done. Time and again they have betrayed us. We had approached the [Rail, Maritime and Transport union] RMT about representation at the garages but they were not interested.

"The unions don't represent the workers. We were never asked by Unite about what we wanted them to take into the pay negotiations. Our interests were not considered."

Another Brixton driver spoke about the cost-of-living pressures: "The price of petrol is going up sky-high, food, everything is going up. When you pay your council tax that is being increased, gas, electricity. Everything is going up, and we get no pay rise, it's basically unfair.

"The managers get their pay rise and their bonuses, so why shouldn't we get something as well? During COVID-19, we were on the frontline! I thought the managers would have used their consideration and said, 'These drivers deserve something'.

"I'm really disappointed and shocked to know that they didn't use their discretion to say, 'Let's not make drivers go to strike, let's deal with them fairly, like everyone else'. I think it's appalling. They should stop everything and say, 'Let's deal with the drivers fairly, because they are taking the passengers' lives in their hands every day. They hold a lot of responsibility for these people's lives, and they do it over and over, 24 hours—night drivers, day drivers—seven days a week. I think it is bad, and they should think about it and decide to give us a good deal so we can live comfortably, so we can match up to inflation."

Asked about his views on Brixton being blocked from joining the strike, he replied, "Whoever's responsible for the unfair play against us drivers to get a fair deal like everyone else, that person should be dismissed. Straight up. I'll tell anyone that today: If you're going to try to make us lose opportunity, or lose what we deserve, you should be dismissed. Whoever did this needs to be removed from their job. If a driver did something like this, they would be removed immediately!

"If it's Unite the union who messed up, they need to step down, whosoever did this they need to step down. If it's Arriva, then step down. Whosoever is responsible for unfair play they need to step down. If you are due for something, you should get what you are due.

"We bus drivers deserve a pay rise. We should be able to get a decent wage so that we can support a family, drive and come to work, not worry about 'The petrol is too expensive, let me take the bus', because sometimes we finish late at night and the rain is falling but they need us to be at work, so we need to use our cars so we can get back home safely. If we do an early shift in the morning, we need a car because there's no bus running! We are the first bus in the morning, so we need to be out there early."

Asked what he thought the current pay demand should be, the driver replied, "The minimum is that we match inflation, but I think that we should be a bit over, so we can sustain a comfortable life—so we wouldn't have to be struggling, wouldn't have to be doing overtime and not getting enough rest to maintain our life. If I want to go on holiday, or I want to buy a car or whatever, I can do overtime, but I shouldn't be forced to do overtime because I want to match up to inflation.

"We need to rest as well. Can you imagine? You're doing a 10-hour day, up to 11 hours sometimes, and then you have to go and do overtime. When do we rest? If we have a collision because we're tired or sleepy... we're taking a risk, to be honest. There's no family time. We miss out a lot on those valuable times. It's not nice.

"When we think that Unite would be supporting us and having our backs, it seems like everyone is taking a brown envelope and is putting drivers behind. We are looking for someone we can rely on, who we can pay, to support us, making sure that we are getting a fair pay deal, making sure that we are being taken care of. But even though we're paying them, we can't trust them."



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