

“Activists” promote Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham in Arriva London South pay dispute

Laura Tiernan
13 April 2022

Around 1,000 bus drivers in south London are fighting for a pay rise that should have been finalised last year.

Amid surging inflation, Unite the union is trying to foist an effective pay cut on drivers at the Arriva bus company, a division of transport giant Deutsche Bahn (revenue €44.43 billion).

Drivers at Arriva South have already rejected two insulting pay offers brought to them by Unite, the first a 1.5 percent increase, then a 3 percent rise that falls significantly short of last year’s inflation rate of 5.4 percent in the 12 months to December 2021.

Unite officials restarted pay talks on April 7, after a 48-hour strike halted services at Croydon, Thornton Heath and Norwood garages on March 28-29. The strike went ahead thanks to solid support by drivers, defeating Unite’s efforts to sabotage the struggle.

At Croydon garage, the Unite rep issued a notice advising drivers to work during the strike. At Brixton, Unite colluded with Arriva, creating the impression that a court injunction had been obtained by the company to ban the strike.

Unite’s continuing efforts to betray the Arriva South pay fight were demonstrated on April 7 in a “notice to members” on the outcome of pay talks held that day. It stated that officials had asked for “an improvement” on Arriva’s 3 percent offer, but that “no official offer was tabled” by the union’s negotiators!

As drivers from the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee wrote, “an improvement could mean anything from 3.1 percent or maybe a 1 percent increase to 4 percent”, warning “Unite is preparing to force through another below inflation pay cut.”

After Unite announced that canteen meetings would be held at each garage “to discuss the way forward”, the committee urged drivers to take the initiative and

formulate their own demands for an above inflation pay rise:

“The reps should be instructed to fight for that and if they refuse, a rank-and-file strike committee should be elected to run the dispute properly. If any Unite members want to discuss with drivers from the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee we are happy to talk.”

The committee warned, “Those Unite ‘activists’ promoting Sharon Graham are spreading confusion and helping the union prepare a sell-out.”

This was in reference to a group of self-styled “union activists” including James Rossi, Kevin Mustafa and Bish Bishop, who responded to WSWs’s exposure of Unite by urging drivers to put their trust in its General Secretary Sharon Graham, portraying her as a new broom sweeping away corruption.

The exposure by WSWs of Unite’s underhand tricks at Brixton garage had provoked an outpouring of anger among drivers. The union “activists” responded with two initiatives: 1) a petition calling on Graham to sack London regional bus officers John Murphy and Peter Kavanagh, and 2) an otherwise ingratiating letter to Kavanagh protesting his callous response to the deaths of London bus drivers during the pandemic.

Both initiatives sought to divert drivers from the path of independent struggle into dead-end appeals to the good conscience of Unite officials.

A “Dear Sharon” letter from Rossi summed up their grovelling approach. He attached a copy of the letter WSWs had circulated from Arriva confirming Unite had voluntarily withdrawn strike action at Brixton, writing, “we are not happy with the current leadership of Peter Kavanagh and the lead/regional officer John Murphy. I implore you to please remove these people from their positions as soon as possible.”

It was “extremely concerning”, Rossi wrote, that bus drivers were leaving Unite. He ended with a profession of loyalty to Unite’s top official, “It’s completely up to you and I have every faith that you will make the right and tough decisions when called upon.”

That night, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee held an emergency Zoom meeting to discuss Unite’s sabotage of the Arriva pay dispute and plan a fightback. Bish Bishop attended the event to challenge what he described as “the disturbing statement that bus drivers should organise independently of Unite”.

Despite having missed the opening report to the meeting by WSWs reporter Tony Robson, a comprehensive account of the dispute and its broader political context, Bishop spoke first, insisting that whatever valid criticisms the committee had of Unite, the only way to fight was through the union.

In reply, speakers reviewed the role of Unite, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and other unions in suppressing industrial action and enforcing historic attacks on workers’ pay and conditions. On the London Underground, the RMT and ASLEF are currently sitting on huge strike mandates, refusing drivers’ demand for united action despite job cuts and detailed plans to gut pensions.

Arriva drivers at the Zoom meeting backed the committee’s stance. One asked, “Can the whole bus industry dump Unite, if they are in cahoots with companies?” Another driver questioned angrily, “Does the union think that the drivers deserve 3.1 percent pay rise which is less than the inflation rate? Us bus drivers have been kicked and pushed from side to side for many, many years and I think it’s the union be honest... This is absolutely disgusting.”

Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Chris Marsden explained that the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is a militant faction of drivers committed to the principle that workers’ interests must take priority over corporate profit. The committee is open to all bus workers, regardless of whether they are members of Unite, the RMT or no union. Whether drivers remained Unite members or resigned, they faced the same issue: that the pay fight is being waged as much against the union as the company. It is out of this struggle that the need to build new organisations which will not compromise workers’ interests will become clear.

The next day, news from Brixton garage confirmed this prognosis. With a new strike ballot underway, the rep posted a “pay talks update” exposing the extent of

Unite’s conspiracy against bus workers. Stating that “the 3 percent offer didn’t change after we asked for 4 percent”, the rep stated, “to overcome the impasse, we suggested a lump sum of £750 added on top of the backdated 3 percent. The company said they would go away and seek permission for this and get back to us.”

This would have been music to Arriva’s ears. A token lump sum has become a favoured method for ramming through below-inflation pay deals.

Could there be a clearer indication that workers need to break from this corrupt pro-company syndicate? Behind workers’ backs, Unite was offering a wage deal that was rejected by drivers across Arriva South in a ballot on March 25.

The Brixton “update” refuted the claims by Rossi, Mustafa, Bishop et al that Graham had “listened” to drivers and was intervening to replace Murphy and Kavanagh with officials who were willing to fight.

Like a fortune teller reading tea leaves, Rossi had claimed that “change is here” because Graham had placed Bobby Morton, Unite national officer for passenger transport, in charge of pay talks at Arriva South! “Bobby”, Rossi explained, is one of “Sharon’s generals”. The last time these “generals” led a dispute together, at Manchester Go North West, they betrayed an 11-week strike pushing through over £1 million pounds in cuts.

Unite is laying the ground for a sell-out at Arriva that can be averted only if drivers seize the initiative. This means rejecting the PR campaign for Sharon Graham and launching an independent fight for a genuine cost-of-living increase.

Drivers across Arriva London South have made clear they regard anything below 5 percent backdated for 2021 as a pay cut. The WSWs urges bus and transport workers to review the statement issued last November by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and to join the committee to prepare a long overdue offensive.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact