

Unite blocks joint action by London bus drivers against pay restraint

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The pay disputes at Arriva London South and London United expose the role of Unite in preventing a combined fight by bus drivers for a cost-of-living wage increase against pay restraint by the private operators.

Under the impact of the pandemic and with inflation at a 30 year high, having risen to 7 percent CPI and 9 percent RPI in March, the anniversary pay awards have become a travesty from the standpoint of pressing the demands of bus drivers. Far from negotiations between opposing sides, they assume the character of a conspiracy between Unite and the operators to prevent a pay struggle from breaking out. This has led to pay awards being settled months or a year late, or even later, with the union and company using back pay to camouflage the content of rotten deals.

Following the two-day strike at the end of March by hundreds of bus drivers at Arriva London South against a revised 3 percent offer for 2021, Unite has proposed in further negotiations only an additional lump sum of £750 to “overcome the impasse”, and for the de facto pay cut to be backdated.

In the case of London United the union has recommended rejection of a revised 3.2 percent deal on the grounds that the offer for 2021/2 is below inflation. The only consistency in the position of Unite is its divide and rule approach.

Around 1,000 bus drivers at London United would already be engaged in strike action alongside those at Arriva if this were not the case.

These workers, based at seven garages in west and south west London, rejected a “final offer” of 2.5 percent back in January and voted for strike action in early February by more than 90 percent. They subsequently rejected a revised offer of 3.1 percent. The formal rejection of the latest revised offer and the decision to reballot for strike action has not stemmed

the anger of drivers.

As a driver at one of the main London United garages explained, “We voted to reject the 2.5 percent and then 3.1 percent. The union has come back with an additional 0.1 percent and an extra £200 bonus in December. My point is this should not even been put to a vote, it’s insulting. This is how the union and company collude to prevent any strike action.”

Unite has not produced a single press release on the rejection of the two derisory pay offers and the earlier vote for strike action at London United, burying it as a news item on its website.

London United is part of RATP Dev and was hit by strike action last year, the first on London buses since the start of the pandemic.

The union demobilised that strike by over 2,000 drivers, which started in February and ended in May, scaling down the action and driving a wedge between drivers in the three London subsidiaries of the company. It promoted a 1 percent pay rise at Quality Line for the lowest paid drivers on London buses, then pushed through 1.25 percent at London Sovereign, and finally a 2.25 percent award at London United in a two-year deal.

Unite Regional Officer Michelle Braveboy declared Unite was drawing a “line in the sand” with the strike action. But this hot air evaporated under conditions in which the union had re-established its control over the pent-up anger among bus workers, working to demoralise them by insisting nothing more was achievable.

To tamp down opposition to the pay deal, which was only narrowly accepted at London United, the union claimed it would push for a more substantial pay award in the next pay round—a promise refuted by Unite’s antics since, as it stalls strike action with one derisory

pay offer after another.

The private operators such as RATP Dev and Arriva London South plead poverty while Unite acts as their industrial police force, protecting their profits extracted from bus workers under the conditions of a pandemic—in which their lives have been treated as expendable.

RATP Dev is the international arm of RATP Group, the French-owned transnational transport company with annual revenues of €5.5 billion, employing 63,000 workers across its global operations. RATP Group has boasted of a bounce back for the first half of 2021 and stated that net profits are now comparable with pre-pandemic levels. The group's share of net profits reached €105 million, a €193 million increase compared to June 2020, with net profits from subsidiaries having grown by €39 million.

The WSWS has been informed by London United bus drivers that according to the pay claim calculator of Unite, based on the cost of living and company profits, the pay demand should have been 8.9 percent. This has never been tabled.

Drivers were polled by the union over the pay claim through “aspiration papers” in which they were encouraged to state the demand the union should put forward. Unite declined to publish results from the poll across the seven garages, claiming the consensus was 5 percent. The union has not been prepared to organise industrial action to achieve even this figure.

The experiences of London United and Arriva London South drivers demonstrate the necessity of workers taking the initiative and organising their fight independently of Unite. From the standpoint of waging the most elementary struggle, the trade unions are in a state of decomposition. The election of Sharon Graham as Unite General Secretary last August has changed nothing in terms of the union's unbroken record of sellouts over many years.

Graham has directly overseen the suppression of a national strike movement on the buses at the largest private operator, Stagecoach, and the prospect of one developing at Arriva, in favour of the small change of revised pay offers. This has involved trampling over demands for parity pay and resulted in below inflation deals. All the agreements were welcomed by the companies—agreements through which Unite has restored its cosy relationship with management on the

spurious grounds that fair pay has been established.

London United drivers should vote decisively to reject the revised 3.2 percent offer in the ballot to be held on April 21. As the experience in February demonstrates, a mandate for strike action in the current ballot must be taken out of the hands of Unite and dates immediately set for action. To organise their collective strength bus drivers should establish rank-and-file committees in a London-wide network, joining up the fight at Arriva and London United, breaking down the pro-company divisions enforced by Unite.

The fight for a genuine pay rise must be combined with opposition to the sweatshop conditions demanded by the employers, including the lengthening of consecutive days worked without a rest, reduced break times and the removal of all COVID restrictions such as the ending of mask wearing and isolation rules. This is the perspective outlined in the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee statement, “Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop conditions!” We urge bus workers to make contact and discuss how this fight can be taken forward.



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