

Brixton bus drivers vote to strike at Arriva London South: “We are not okay with 3 percent”

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27 April 2022

Bus drivers at London’s Brixton garage will strike next month against a below-inflation 3 percent pay offer by Arriva bus company. Brixton will join Arriva London South (ALS) garages Croydon, Thornton Heath and Norwood during three days of strikes on May 11, 16 and 17.

The strike vote won easily, with 169 voting “yes” and 13 “no”. 182 Unite members voted out of 270 who were eligible. There are around 400 drivers at the garage.

It is the second time Brixton drivers have voted for industrial action in as many months. An earlier strike vote was blocked on technical grounds, with Arriva and Unite creating the false impression a court injunction had been obtained to prevent industrial action.

News of the strike vote at Brixton was eagerly awaited across Arriva London South. Drivers are determined to win an above-inflation pay award, with this year’s pay talks already delayed and inflation running at 9 percent.

“I voted to strike”, a senior driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*. He condemned Arriva and Unite’s delaying tactics, explaining, “The current strike is for last year, but we are facing inflation now! The pay talks for 2022 should have started in April.”

Unite issued a “pay talks update” at the garage on April 7, announcing they had resubmitted the same 3 percent pay claim that was rejected by members on March 25. Unite merely tacked on a miserable £750 lump sum as a “sweetener”.

Another Brixton driver told WSWs, “We are certainly not voting to go [on strike] for 3 percent. We are not okay with three percent. That’s far from the mark.

“Unite’s asking for 3 percent, but we voted for 5 percent,” the driver said, referring to an online poll on WhatsApp asking Brixton drivers to select either 3 percent or 5 percent as their preferred claim for last year –

77 percent of drivers selected 5 percent.

During last year’s pay claim period (April 1, 2020 to April 1, 2021) inflation was above 5 percent for nearly half the time (November to April). In March it was 7 percent (Consumer Prices Index). A 3 percent claim is an effective pay cut.

Many Arriva drivers are demanding a far higher increase for last year. On Facebook and WhatsApp, pay figures of 8 percent, 9 percent and 15 percent have been cited, with drivers pointing to years of wage suppression and being forced to work overtime to pay bills.

Unite issued a statement Tuesday announcing next month’s strike dates across all four garages. It was headlined, “ALS drivers fight for better pay!” But it did not include a single word about Unite’s own pay claim!

The statement showed Unite’s subservience to the bus operators. “Arriva drivers aren’t asking the company to go broke,” Unite stated. There is no danger of that. Revenues for Arriva’s parent company DB Group rose 18.4 percent in 2021 to €47.3 billion. Net profit was €5 billion as the company raked in taxpayer funded COVID subsidies to protect shareholders.

Unite portrays the Arriva pay fight as a terrible misunderstanding, “Unfortunately the company does not seem to understand that you need to be able to live off of your wages.” But Arriva’s profits depend on the suppression of wages.

Unite begs Arriva to be “reasonable”. But the company is refusing to budge in pay talks because they are holding the line on behalf of Metroline, Go Ahead, Stagecoach and other transport giants who fear any above inflation pay award will have a knock-on effect.

In February, faced with rising inflation, Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey laid out the class war agenda of the major banks and corporate boardrooms

when he declared that “painful” wage suppression would be necessary. Britain’s financial press is nervously discussing a “summer of discontent” amid NATO’s war drive that is fuelling a global inflationary spiral.

Arriva London South drivers can only win their demands for an inflation-busting pay rise if they break Unite’s grip and join bus and transport workers across London in a common fight. A network of rank-and-file committees must be established, independent of the pro-company unions, to draw up demands for improved pay and conditions. Drivers’ pay must be automatically indexed to inflation to defeat the cost-of-living squeeze.

The unions’ role in dividing workers and suppressing industrial action is not confined to the buses. On the London Underground, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and train drivers’ union ASLEF are refusing to act on a live strike mandate from thousands of their members against historic job cuts and plans to gut pensions. Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan is set to enforce billions of pounds in cuts across rail, bus, DLR and tube, on behalf of the Johnson government.

Across Network Rail and the train operating companies, the government has unveiled the biggest attacks on rail workers since privatisation. The RMT is balloting its 40,000 rail members for strike action. Thousands of jobs are targeted for destruction. Yet the RMT is telling its members that industrial action must be “responsible”, while it sits on Johnson’s Rail Industry Recovery Group that is drawing up the cuts!

The conditions exist for a unified offensive. The trillions of pounds squandered on bailouts to the corporations and the obscene profits being accumulated by the banks and financial institutions must be seized by the working class and put to socially useful purposes. The WSWs urges bus workers to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and discuss how to develop this fight.

Brixton drivers speak

A senior driver at Brixton said, “I voted to strike. That was for last year, but we’ve got different circumstances now. We are facing inflation *now*.”

“If they didn’t delay last year, we wouldn’t be having the strike this year, would we? Last year is gone. We are living now, and we need to change accordingly.”

The driver was scathing about Unite’s re-submitted 3 percent claim, “What does that say about the union that is supposed to be representing us? What does it say about them and what they think about us? The members? And our demands?”

“My rep said they put in a claim to the company for last year for 3 percent plus £750, which I think the drivers would’ve accepted just to get it over and done with. Now we will need to go again for this year which should’ve been started from the beginning of April.

“The company was supposed to get back to them [Unite] to say whether they would agree to that or not. They were just waiting to see if we would vote to strike. Maybe within the next couple of days we will hear something.

“I don’t really know what is going on. But the actions of the company and the union, they’re just taking us for granted.

“Everyone thinks this is an easy job. I’ve been doing this job for many years, and it’s gone right down. And the amount of pressure that they are putting on drivers now, and they don’t want to pay them? The starting rate at Arriva now is £12 or £11, or something.

“You can get that stacking shelves in Asda, without any of the stress. They’ve got this thing now where they’ve got ‘mystery travellers’ who go on the bus. You’re supposed to engage with them. You have to be smiling all the time. It is too much!”

Another Brixton driver said, “Arriva is bound to say, ‘okay we will give you 3 percent’. But that’s not what we want. Unite is going to have to come back and ask us if that’s okay with us. We can’t just say we are okay with 3 percent because we are not okay with 3 percent.

“People are very tired that this is taking too long. We are talking about last year’s pay. It’s just dragging on and on and we want to fight for now. It’s delay tactics on both sides. Unite is working with Arriva to drag things out. It’s their common purpose.

“We’ve got to fight the deal ethos of Arriva, paying us as little as possible and then drivers leave the company and go work for companies that pay more. Our garage is understaffed. They are desperate for drivers. Everyone has to do overtime just to keep up, and then they complain when there are more and more accidents. When you are tired like that, it is hard to drive.”



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