

Support Arriva South bus drivers! For a London-wide strike to break Unite's de facto pay freeze!

Statement by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
10 May 2022

At Arriva London South (ALS) around 1,000 bus drivers are striking on May 11, 16 and 17 to demand a pay increase in line with inflation. They have rejected a below-inflation offer of just 3 percent from Arriva and Unite the union.

Following pay-talks on May 4, Arriva offered just 3 percent, backdated by five months, and a lump sum of £300. But Unite's own pay claim on April 7 was barely any different: 3 percent backdated to April 2021 and a £750 lump sum!

Drivers at ALS are not only in battle against Arriva, owned by transport giant Deutsche Bahn Group (net worth £16.73 billion). They are also entering a head-on confrontation with Unite. With inflation running at 7 percent in the 12 months to April 1, 2022 (the period covered by pay talks), Unite's offer to Arriva is a significant pay cut.

In pay talks May 10, Arriva refused to budge on its pay offer. They are determined to hold the line on behalf of the bus operators, who fear that any above-inflation pay rise at ALS will have a knock-on effect for this year's pay talks.

By Unite's own admission, it has presided over four years of below-inflation pay deals.

One year ago, during the pay strikes at RATP, Unite's Michelle Braveboy claimed the union was drawing a "line in the sand" as drivers had "not received a pay-rise in three years". But Unite divided drivers across RATP's three subsidiaries—London United, London Sovereign and Quality Line—wearing down opposition before pushing through yet more below-inflation pay-deals of just 1.5 percent.

Since then, inflation has spiralled, hitting 9 percent in April and predicted to reach 10 percent in the coming

weeks. Another 32 percent hike in gas and electricity prices is due in October, pushing annual fuel bills for households above £2,600. NATO's warmongering against Russia, including sanctions, is pushing fuel prices to record levels, while shortages of Russian fertiliser and grain will slash global agricultural output, leading to poverty and hunger for millions.

Drivers at Arriva South have said enough is enough. They have already rejected pay offers of 1.5 and 3 percent. Many have declared that anything less than 5 percent for last year is unacceptable.

Workers across the world are demanding action to make up for decades of wage suppression, with major strikes by transport workers in Germany, Spain, India, Canada, the United States and Brazil. By 2021, workers in Britain had experienced the longest wages slump since the Napoleonic Wars. A two-decade hit to wages has reduced average disposable income by 42 percent, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS).

The trade unions have been the chief enablers of this social disaster, colluding with employers to suppress strikes and ramp up exploitation. Industrial action has flatlined since the 1980s, allowing corporate boardrooms to reap record profits. The eight-hour day, penalty rates for overtime and other hard-won conditions have been torn up. Driver fatigue and accidents are rife in the bus industry. The planned introduction of Remote Sign-On will place us at the company's beck-and-call 24/7.

Those promoting Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham as a friend of bus workers are engaged in a snow job. Unite's below-inflation claim at Arriva is part of a pattern, demonstrating its corporatist partnership with business. At Arriva North West, the

union suspended strike action last November to push through a 3 percent pay deal. It shut down a five-week strike at Arriva Wales based on the same figure. At Stagecoach, Unite blocked national strike action, dividing drivers into 20 separate disputes that resulted in just two major strikes. After 17 days of action at Stagecoach Wales, Unite celebrated an hourly increase to £10.50—just £1 above the minimum wage.

Unite’s “activists” claim that Graham will lead the fight for an above-inflation pay deal for 2022. But the union is pursuing a strategy of isolation and division. It is colluding with the companies by holding separate pay talks at Arriva South, Arriva North, Go-Ahead, Abellio, Metroline and RATP.

As the fight took off at Arriva South, Unite quietly stalled strike action at RATP subsidiary London United. In February, around 1,000 drivers at seven London United garages in south and west London voted to strike, rejecting a string of below-inflation pay offers for 2021/2, including a derisory 3.2 percent and £200 lump sum. Unite has kept both fights separate.

Arriva drivers are angered over the delay of last year’s pay-rise and are keen to pursue at least a 10 percent rise for this year, in line with inflation. But drivers at ALS cannot win on their own.

Arriva South must become the launch pad for London-wide strike action to smash the de facto pay-freeze. This means breaking Unite’s control over the dispute and forming rank-and-file committees at every garage. Drivers should demand simultaneous ballots for industrial action across all companies to break Unite’s conspiracy with the operators.

In their pay-talks update on April 26, Unite declared, “we don’t want the company to go broke”. But it’s not Arriva going broke, it’s us!

Arriva is crying poor, claiming “we have made the best offer in an exceedingly challenging climate that the business can afford.” What a fraud. Revenues for DB Group, Arriva’s parent company, rose 18.4 percent in 2021 to €47.3 billion, with a net profit of €5 billion. Go-Ahead posted £115.5 million profit last year, including £65 million from its bus division. Metroline’s parent company ComfortDelGro made \$210.0 million profit in 2021. Stagecoach profits doubled to £32.9 million, and First’s operating profit was £285.8 million. The same companies have received billions in COVID subsidies, even as their criminal negligence led to the deaths of 73

London bus workers from COVID-19.

London bus drivers have powerful allies. In March, tube strikes brought services to a halt, demonstrating the power and fighting capacity of the working class. But the Rail Maritime and Transport union is working with drivers’ union ASLEF to block unified action, allowing a strike vote by thousands of drivers, platform and ticketing staff, maintenance workers and signallers to expire even as TfL axes hundreds of jobs and prepares to rollout pension reform.

The financial crisis triggered by the pandemic has been used to unleash an historic assault on London transport workers. Cuts of £2 billion are being drawn up by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan on behalf of the Johnson government. At the same time, 40,000 rail workers are being balloted nationally for strike action against a new wave of privatisation by Great British Rail. Thousands of jobs, conditions and pensions are targeted for destruction.

It is high time for bus, rail and underground workers to come together in a common fight. Rank-and-file committees, reflecting the unity, strength and creative initiative of transport workers, must be established at every garage and depot. Such committees must draw up demands for an inflation-busting pay rise and map out a campaign to win support, including from Deutsche Bahn’s 300,000 employees, 195,000 of whom are in Germany.

Privatisation and the subordination of transport to corporate profit have proven to be a disaster. If transport giants such as Arriva say they cannot provide decent pay and conditions or affordable fares for passengers, they should be taken into public ownership and placed under the democratic control of the working class. The billions of pounds squandered in shareholder dividends and profits must be freed for socially useful purposes.

We urge bus and transport workers who agree with this fight to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee. **E-mail** londonbusrankandfile@protonmail.com



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact