

# Thornton Heath bus drivers denounce latest offer from Arriva London South: ‘It’s a pay cut!’

Our reporters  
16 May 2022

On Saturday, bus drivers at Thornton Heath garage in London left no doubt about their attitude to the latest pay deal cobbled together by Arriva and Unite the union. “The deal is crap”, a driver told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, “I’m voting to reject it. It’s worse than the last one!”

Unite announced what it falsely described as an “improved offer” from the company last Thursday. Arriva offered just 3.5 percent plus a £250 lump sum. Of this, 3 percent is backdated to August (instead of April) with a 0.5 percent “uplift” that will be subtracted from this year’s delayed pay agreement, whenever that is finally reached.

Drivers at Thornton Heath rejected a previous offer of 3 percent by 145 votes to 45, on March 25. It was the second highest “no” vote after the Norwood garage, which voted to reject by 200 votes to 38. If anything, sentiments have hardened since then, with drivers on Saturday denouncing Unite’s collusion with the bus companies.

A WSWs reporting team spoke with dozens of drivers and distributed leaflets issued by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, “Reject Unite’s latest sell-out pay deal at Arriva London South bus company! Form rank-and-file strike committees!” and “Support Arriva South bus drivers! For a London-wide strike to break Unite’s de facto pay freeze!”

One driver said of the revised deal, “It’s no different from what they offered before. What they offered before was 3 percent and back pay from April, and now they offer 3.5 and back pay from August, so we lose almost £300!” He said support for a ‘no’ vote inside the garage was high, and that his colleagues “don’t want to accept it, and I won’t accept it.”

He attacked Unite for keeping garages divided, including via separate pay talks for Arriva North and Arriva South: “There is no difference between North and South. When we have the pay talks, they say ‘we talk about North, and we talk about South’. We are the same, and we do the same job. So we have to talk at the same time!”

Other drivers shared their comments as they walked past. “Unite aren’t fighting hard enough,” said one driver who took leaflets. “They’re not on our side, are they?” said the next. Another agreed, “I don’t understand why we don’t have all of London on strike. We should have all bus drivers out together.”

Former Cricklewood driver David O’Sullivan joined the campaign on Saturday afternoon. O’Sullivan was sacked by Metrolink in February 2021 after he demanded safety protections for drivers during the COVID-19 pandemic. He blew the whistle over an outbreak of infections at the garage and asserted his right to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act.

O’Sullivan is campaigning for his reinstatement and received a warm response from drivers at Thornton Heath.

One driver told O’Sullivan, “Three or four drivers at this garage died during COVID”. Mervyn Kennedy, a father-of-three who worked at the garage for 16 years, died during the first wave. In April 2020, Kennedy’s family spoke out, exposing the lack of PPE for bus drivers. Transport for London’s director of bus operations, Claire Mann, responded by claiming PPE was “not required in non-care settings and could be counter-productive.”

Unite issued joint letters with TfL and the bus

operators in April 2020, insisting that face masks and other PPE were “not recommended”. They worked to keep the service running at all costs.

75 London bus workers have died from COVID-19, according to figures released by TfL at the end of March. The impact runs deep, and the experience has left workers thinking deeply about a society that prioritises profits over lives. It is fuelling drivers’ anger and sense of injustice over the below-inflation pay deal from Arriva-Unite.

A female driver described the pay deal as, “Awful, absolutely awful. It’s a pay cut, we’re not gaining anything financially at all. Drivers are under a lot of pressure. As regards to working hours, they’re working rest days just to make ends meet. Overtime on the actual days they’re working, flat out. It’s affected social life, family life in particular—it’s a strain.”

She told O’Sullivan, “A number of friends have passed on, from COVID in particular. We have lost people in this garage.” After risking their lives, “it was a box of chocolates we were offered for COVID. I rejected it.”

She opposed the multitude of pay scales dividing drivers: “We have far too many different grades within Arriva, over 40 different grades. There’s a very visible divide, financially. We all do the same job and we’re all paid very differently.”

Another driver said of the pay offer, “It’s an insult. They just change the words around and they think we can’t figure it out. In fact, if you look at it, the last one was better than what they’re offering now!”

He agreed that drivers should be united across London, including at Arriva North and South: “That’s what I’m having a problem with, personally. We should be on the same scale. We’re facing the same problems, same road, same bikes.

“Cost-of-living is affecting everybody! You go to the shops, and what you used to buy for 20 quid, now you can’t. But it’s the same old story, they keep saying to us: ‘they don’t have money, they don’t have money, they don’t have money’. It’s the same old story they give us every year. I remember 12 years ago, they told us the company needs help—they cut our rest day money and everything, that is ‘for a couple of years’. It’s 13 years now; they never returned it to us. And now, they won’t even give us a pay rise!”

WSWS reporters pointed out that Arriva’s parent

company, DB Group, recently told investors that “Revenue losses [due to the pandemic] were more than offset by higher government support payments”. DB Group’s accounts show total assets of €72 billion on December 31, 2021. Its net profit for the year improved by €5 billion.

A driver initially refused to speak to WSWS campaigners, thinking they were from the union. But after O’Sullivan explained, “We’re not with Unite”, he stopped and took leaflets, commenting, “Everybody’s mad at the whole situation” and that “Unite is not a union.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**