Reject the Translink pay offer! Northern Ireland bus workers' strike cancelled to vote on below-inflation pay deal

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Bus workers in Northern Ireland at state backed transport company Translink are voting this week on yet another below inflation pay offer. Details are sketchy, but according to a report in the *Irish News*, Translink workers on Metro, Ulsterbus, Goldline and Glider services have been offered a 5 percent pay increase, backdated to April 2021.

The offer is reported to be in the form of a "progression payment" for staff, while a probationary rate for new starts will be removed. New starts will not get the progression payment for another two years. Currently a new start bus driver can expect £414.41 weekly, £11.51 an hour, after five to eight weeks training, and then £460.45 weekly, £12.79 an hour, after six months for a 36-hour week. A five percent increase would take these rates to £12.09 and £13.43 an hour respectively.

Bus drivers, cleaners and shunters, members of the Unite and GMB unions, previously rejected the company's initial offer of three percent and were on the brink of taking seven days strike action, planned to start April 25. That strike was called off April 21, after Translink marginally improved their offer, giving the trade unions a pretext to call another ballot. The second offer, full details of which were never made public, was rejected by bus workers May 9, and another seven-day strike announced for May 17.

The last major bus strike in Northern Ireland was 19 years ago, with a series of one day stoppages against low pay. Hundreds of drivers supported pickets at bus depots across Northern Ireland and around 300 routes were cancelled. Bus workers have also repeatedly taken strike action against attacks on drivers and their vehicles. Last November, workers walked out after buses were hijacked and set on fire during loyalist riots against the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Under conditions of immense class tensions developing worldwide and fearing a large transport strike could quickly become a pole of attraction in the working class, the May 17 strike was also called off. This time workers were given just a few hours' notice of the union officials' decision.

Peter Macklin, GMB Regional Organiser described the cancellation as a "gesture of goodwill" towards Translink. The company happily reciprocated, welcoming "constructive engagement with our unions". A spokesperson continued "we are pleased to have found a way forward that will enable us to build back public transport for a more sustainable and better future for all."

The mutual warmth between Translink and the trade union apparatus reflects the extent of the union's corporatist integration with the company. The annual charade of protracted negotiations and mutual bluster is followed inevitably by terms that leave workers worse off. The current dispute is over *last year's* pay round. Such has been the deliberate foot dragging by unions that Translink's latest five percent offer and the unions' initial demand for six percent are several percentage points below inflation, currently running at around nine percent and expected to soon reach as high as eleven percent.

Without bus workers taking matters into their own hands through the formation of rank and file committees, uniting bus and transport workers in defence of jobs and living standards, Translink's assault on pay and conditions will deepen and their struggles will be sabotaged by unions which police the

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companies' dictates.

Shortly before he cancelled the last strike, Macklin hailed the fact that buses in Northern Ireland operated throughout the coronavirus crisis. Macklin claimed bus workers "were proud to carry out their duty during the pandemic--despite potentially putting themselves and their families lives at risk." Yet his union is happy to put an offer to drivers that will result in an effective pay cut.

Neither Translink or the unions have released figures on the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths among bus workers in Northern Ireland. Drivers are at high-risk from the virus due to their close contact with passengers in a confined and poorly ventilated space. The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee has highlighted the death of 78 drivers to the virusa death toll for which the trade unions bear full responsibility, having colluded with the bus operators to deny workers PPE and other protections.

Bus workers are fighting to defend their livelihoods as many other sections of workers across Northern Ireland are coming into struggle. To take this forward all sections of the working class must be united in a common struggle against the ruthless dictates of the financial aristocracy. As well as their endless manipulation of sectarian divisions, the employers and the capitalist state in Northern Ireland rely on the trade unions to keep workers' struggles isolated from their class brothers and sisters across Ireland, the UK, Europe and internationally.

Caterpillar workers, also Unite members, have launched a further four weeks of strikes at the company's equipment plants in Larne and Springvale in Belfast, in pursuit of a pay increase to match inflation. The 160 or so workers have rejected a 9 percent pay rise tied to compulsory overtime, amounting to a pay freeze and longer hours.

Sharon Graham, Unite General Secretary, has denounced "greedy" Caterpillar bosses, who have reported £1.5 billion profits, most of which was handed back to shareholders. But the union's regional officer George Brash spelled out Unite's main disagreement with Caterpillar is its failure to negotiate, complaining that, "Caterpillar's management... are refusing to sit down with Unite to resolve this dispute despite requests from the Labour Relations Agency."

Unite have also called off a second series of strikes by council workers in housing, cleaning, catering, transport and education after two weeks of strike action against a 1.75 percent pay offer—the same being offered across Britain. The first strike saw well attended pickets outside council, housing and cleansing offices, and a protest across the road from the count at the Northern Ireland Assembly election. Follow up action was cancelled with no new offers available. Unite has merely agreed to further negotiations with the Education Authority of Northern Ireland and local authorities.

Teachers' union NASUWT has ignored an 80 percent strike vote amongst Northern Ireland teachers. Instead they have authorised a limited work-to-rule against a paltry below inflation pay offer of 3.2 percent over two years.

The strike wave in Northern Ireland comes at a time of acute political crisis, with the Northern Ireland Assembly suspended and disputes over the Northern Ireland Protocol disrupting trade and enflaming relations between the British government, its Irish counterpart, the European Union and the United States. Along with the formation of rank and file action committees, new political leadership is urgently needed in the form of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Ireland to lead a struggle for the abolition of all national borders and to fight for socialism in Ireland, Britain and across Europe.

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