

London United bus drivers oppose Unite's divisive role in pay fight

“We need all London bus drivers to go on strike ... It's Unite who have created these divisions.”

Our reporters
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London United bus drivers have spoken out against the divisions sown by Unite the union in the battle against pay restraint and called for unified action across the capital.

Since the start of this year London United drivers have rejected three revised offers in relation to their pay claim for 2021/2. Around 1,000 bus drivers were balloted by Unite back in February, voting in favour of strike action in defiance of the company's declaration that 2.5 percent was its final offer. Unite has stalled their opposition, isolating three days of strike action at Arriva London South.

Unite's use of constant balloting over derisory offers as a tactic to grind down workers has been highlighted at London United. In April drivers voted down a revised pay proposal which was the lowest increase possible (just 0.1 percent) on those already rejected—a 3.2 percent offer with a £200 lump sum.

Last Friday the union managed to get a sellout deal at Arriva London South over the line for the 2021/2 pay award. The “improved offer” of 3.5 percent includes a 0.5 percent advance on the still to be negotiated award for 2022/3. It was backdated to August rather than April, losing drivers hundreds of pounds. The company reduced the lump sum offered in previous proposals to £250.

The deal passed by majority of 59 percent, with the vote partly swayed by Unite claiming a yes vote would allow the union to press on with a higher pay claim for this year.

London United drivers have first-hand experience of such empty promises aimed at sabotaging a genuine

fight. As part of RATP Group—along with two other subsidiaries—they were the first to strike in the capital last year over pay since the start of the pandemic.

The dispute involved around 2,000 drivers when it started in February, but Unite quickly wound down its selective strike action, dividing the subsidiaries and settling for miserly increases. Last May at London United, the union pushed through a 2.25 percent increase for a two-year agreement up to December 2021. Shepherds Bush was one of three garages out of seven that voted the deal down. It passed by a majority of just 57 votes of the 1,337 cast across London United.

As a driver from Park Royal garage who voted to reject the deal explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* in February, “Last year's strike was such a big disappointment. We took 10 days of strike action and all I got was a 33-pence an hour increase. The union made us look stupid in front of the company. We were told by Unite that it would be followed up by a bigger pay increase next time.”

Far from clearing the decks for an inflation-busting pay deal, Unite has sat on opposition as inflation has soared to a 40 year high of 11.1 percent.

Bus drivers are now being re-balloted yet again over strike action. Unite has announced two days of stoppages from June 2, but this is confined solely to supervisory staff and iBus Controllers. Even this limited action, scheduled for the bank holiday, making it less effective, was only announced after Unite had pushed through the sellout deal at Arriva London South.

On Saturday, bus drivers at the Shepherds Bush

garage in west London spoke with David O’Sullivan from the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and a reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site*. They distributed the Committee’s statement, “Reject Unite’s latest sell-out pay deal at Arriva London South bus company! Form rank and file committees!”

One driver said, “We struck for 10 or 11 days last year and the company came with a worse offer; it was rubbish. The union put forward a ballot and we rejected it. The worse thing is that the following week we wanted to strike and the union said no. ‘We have to negotiate with the company,’ the union said, so they cancelled the strike.

“To be honest, it’s just rubbish. The union are not doing anything. They’re not doing anything to help bus drivers.

“We can’t even afford to survive anymore. Everything has gone up, and wages stay the same. You’ve got your family to look after, your rent to pay and how can you survive on it? There’s no way.

“The union, they’re just not doing their job. That’s what I believe. Bus drivers in London, we’re doing hard work. And who cares about that? They don’t. We’re paying the union, giving them our money every week. For what?

“When one company goes on strike, that’s not going to help much. We need all London bus drivers to go on strike. Then everyone will listen to us. The reason why is that the government don’t care, the union don’t care, the company don’t care. Nobody cares. If we go on strike now, at London United, but all the other companies are working we don’t see much difference. It’s Unite who have created these divisions.

“We are still waiting. The offer was 3.2 percent. We rejected it. But we’re waiting and nothing. Nobody’s saying anything. They started negotiating in December 2021 until now. No agreement.”

Another driver who has worked on the buses for more than 20 years spoke about working during the pandemic. “I wasn’t sick, but I knew some drivers who were, I think two or three drivers. A lot of them, they had COVID and then they came back. But I think a few of them, they never came back. They just became worse and worse. We are just a number, you know? We have to unite. We are doing the same job; we do the same thing.”

A third driver told our reporters, “The offer was 3.2

percent and we rejected it in the last vote. The companies are all under one umbrella, but they create a different name and then look at what they do. Maybe it’s for a tax reduction, and it’s also less pay for the drivers. It’s always about making money. They don’t care about the drivers.

“The union is supposed to be the one backing us, but maybe they get something from the company? We worked all through the pandemic. They should at least listen to us and appreciate us.”

Another worker commented, “For RATP [London United] to say that they don’t have money for a pay rise for drivers is like the queen saying she doesn’t have any money. They do have the money. Their shareholders are more important, obviously. Their dividends are more important than giving a fair wage for their drivers.

“I think it’s terrible. I mean there’s nothing we can do really. If our unions had been behind us... I see us all as the same. We do the same job, different company. And like you say, different tie, different shirt. Makes no difference really.

“I think it’s easier to control us if we’re divided. Like they’ll pay one garage a bit more while they try and squeeze those other ones for a bit lower pay. It’s in the company’s interest isn’t it?”



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