

A class strategy to defeat TfL's cuts to London bus routes!

Statement by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
13 June 2022

The savage cuts announced by Transport for London (TfL) across the city's bus network, including the elimination and reduction of dozens of routes, must be met by a combined industrial and political offensive uniting London bus drivers, engineers and passengers with workers on the London Underground and rail network who are preparing to strike nationally.

Since the cuts were announced last month, Unite the union has made clear it has no intention of fighting. No mass meetings have been held and no calls made for industrial action to oppose this social vandalism. Unite has merely stated it will "consult" on the proposed cuts, suppressing all opposition. Meanwhile they are dividing up this year's pay talks, company by company, blocking united action.

Around 16 bus routes are targeted for closure, and 78 inner and central London routes will be reduced, leading to longer wait times and severe overcrowding in the midst of a continuing pandemic. The cuts will impact passengers across the city, especially the elderly, disabled and poor. Passengers already priced out of the tube will be forced to walk to other routes or go without.

At least 350 bus drivers are directly impacted by the axing of routes, with no guarantees for their future. Thousands more will be affected as TfL pursues plans for Remote Sign On and a "flexible" labour force that can be redeployed as needed by the private operators.

Behind TfL's PR-spin about "simplifying the network" and "protecting services needed most", its own documents show routes being diverted from hospitals, forcing the sick and elderly to walk or change buses. Routes are being diverted from schools, colleges, sporting grounds, mosques, synagogues and community centres.

Already, under the cover of the pandemic, 300 buses

have been removed from service with no public consultation, due to reduced frequency. 10 routes have been closed outright in recent years. Now, 250 more buses will be removed from service, while 24 percent of passenger journeys will involve changing vehicles. Meanwhile, Labour's Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has declared buses will be reduced by 20 percent unless further bail-out funds are received on June 24.

The cuts to London's bus service are part of a wider offensive mapped out by Khan in his role as TfL chairman. On Friday, Khan announced fares may rise by 10 percent next year, on top of a 4.8 percent increase this April. The fare hikes will add to record inflation already devouring wages, leaving millions struggling to survive.

On the London Underground, 600 station jobs are being cut, and there are plans to gut pensions, destroying tube workers' right to a secure retirement. Bus drivers must reject the right-wing press campaign against tube drivers as "over-paid". The answer to our own poor pay is a joint struggle with our brothers and sisters on the London Underground. Our cause is one and the same!

Khan's scorched earth policy exposes the claims long peddled by Unite that Labour's Mayor is a friend of bus workers. Khan has made clear he will not deviate from the Johnson government's "bail-out" diktats amounting to £400 million in cuts this year alone. Last week he declared, "The universe I live in is to balance my budget next year..." in other words, austerity is the only option, no ifs or buts.

Announcing the cuts, TfL declared, "The Government set a number of conditions before it would provide emergency funding to enable TfL to keep operating, including requiring us to produce a plan to set out how we would achieve significant financial

savings. This plan included reducing the extent of our bus network”.

The funding crisis has been engineered to force a Thatcherite agenda of privatisation and “managed decline”. In 2017, the Tories axed central grants to London transport, forcing TfL to rely on fares for 72 percent of its revenue. As passenger numbers collapsed during the pandemic, TfL was pushed onto life support, forced to accept emergency “bail-out” funds premised on swingeing cuts.

While the politicians claim there is “no money” to fund transport in the capital of the sixth-largest economy in the world, transport companies such as Arriva, FirstGroup and Abellio have received billions in subsidies, with workers and passengers left to foot the bill.

Bus workers must reject the bogus “consultation” exercise launched by TfL on June 1. TfL’s online survey invites participants to advise which services are needed most, effectively choosing where the cuts should fall. Similar surveys, asking the public to decide which hospitals or schools should be closed, are a cynical method used by capitalist governments the world over to decimate services and demobilise public opposition.

Khan’s consultation pits passengers and bus drivers against one another across north, west, south and east London. It speaks volumes that Unite supports this charade, with its officials and reps urging drivers to complete the survey. We say no to all cuts! Already, passengers have launched petitions to save bus routes, showing the depth of public opposition which must be mobilised to oppose this bus carnage and defend services for all.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee urges a fightback on the following principles:

1. Unity is strength! The attacks on bus workers are part of a broader assault and can only be defeated on that basis. This month’s strikes on the London Underground and railways must be expanded to encompass bus drivers and engineers in a single fight. The demand must be raised for the complete withdrawal of the Johnson-Khan bail-out measures and Great British Railways privatisation plan. This fight must be developed as part of an international strategy, calling for united action by transport workers across Europe and America who are coming into struggle.

2. Money for transport, not profit and war! All workers must reject the lying claim that there is “no money” for decent wages, pensions or affordable fares. London is a playground for the billionaires, whose wealth has soared during the pandemic, while Johnson and his cabinet of maniacs are funnelling billions into NATO’s proxy war in Ukraine. The income of the top 250 richest people in Britain should be taxed 100 percent and the transport companies expropriated and placed under workers’ control so their wealth can be used for socially useful purposes.

3. Break the grip of the pro-company trade unions! Form rank-and-file committees: To organise a fightback workers need to break the grip of pro-company trade unions that work with the government and build their own rank-and-file committees, controlled by and for workers. While Unite openly suppresses action, the rail unions are using the threat of strikes to reach a deal with Johnson, Khan and the private operators, with the RMT insisting on May 31 that “any changes to structures, working practices, or conditions have to be agreed with our union, not imposed.” RMT and ASLEF are limiting strike action while they negotiate with Johnson’s cronies via the corporatist Rail Industry Recovery Group that was set-up to enforce the Tories’ cuts.

A network of rank-and-file committees would link workers at every depot, garage and workplace, cutting across all divisions and fighting for a strategy that prioritises the needs of the working class and society over corporate profit. **We urge bus and transport workers who agree with this to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee: londonbusrankfile@protonmail.com**



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact