Defeat Unite's sabotage of London bus pay fight: rank-and-file must take control!

Statement by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
28 July 2022

Pay talks "updates" from Unite have exposed the union's role in protecting company and shareholder profits, preventing a combined struggle by bus and transport workers across London for an inflation-busting pay-raise.

Despite RPI inflation hitting 11.8 percent, Unite officials and reps at Stagecoach and London United have presented insulting company offers of 8 percent and 7.8 percent. This is a foretaste of the sell-out deals Unite hopes to enforce across London. This must be rejected!

At **London United** drivers are voting today on a two-year offer of 3.6 percent from December 2021 and 4.2 percent from December 2022.

At **Stagecoach**, drivers are voting today on a revised offer of 8 percent—6 percent backdated to April, plus 2 percent backdated to December.

At **Go Ahead**, **Metroline** and **Arriva**, Unite is working with management to string out pay talks, divide drivers and protect the companies' bottom line. Unite upholds the division of drivers along company lines, with different pay and conditions, blocking a common fight.

At **Arriva London South**, reps have announced a toothless consultative ballot for August 5, after the company announced a delay in talks to September 6.

At **London United**, drivers have returned an 89.8 percent vote for strike action, showing drivers' determination to fight. Across London, anger is mounting.

Unite's helping hand to corporate raiders

At **London General**, owned by Go Ahead, Unite's July 15 "pay talks update" exposed the extent of the union's subservience. Unite explained it had agreed to delay the next round of talks until August 17, "due to the uncertainty of the takeover of the company, as well as current negotiations with TfL [Transport for London]."

Unite's reps are in so deep with the company that they unashamedly ask workers to delay their pay claim, amid the biggest cost-of-living squeeze in decades, to help with Go Ahead's friendly takeover by asset strippers!

Citigroup advised investors last month that Go Ahead's takeover is part of a "flurry of private equity interest in the transport sector… driven by the valuable real estate assets in the form of depots". Go Ahead's business has been valued at £648 million, but its depot real estate is worth £910 million. Citigroup describes the current takeover price as "a steal".

This will not stop Go Ahead from claiming they have "no money" and "cannot afford" a real pay increase for drivers. Its "current negotiations with TfL" (cited by Unite) doubtless include plans to sell-off prime garage real estate. This is part of £2 billion in cuts dictated by the Johnson government and enforced by Blairite Mayor of London Sadiq Khan.

Lessons of ALS dispute: Sharon Graham's "clean broom"

In March, drivers from Arriva London South (ALS) at Brixton, Norwood, Thornton Heath and Croydon began a determined two-month fight for improved pay that was sabotaged by Unite. The company's delayed pay award for April 2021-March 2022, recommended by Unite, was for 3.5 percent plus a £250 lump sum—far below inflation running at 7 percent over the same 12-month period.

The ALS dispute saw growing opposition by drivers to Unite's collusion with the bus operators. The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee advocated a London-wide

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strike to break Unite's enforced de facto pay freeze. We argued for rejection of Unite's sell-out deals and the election of rank-and-file committees to fight for an inflation-busting pay raise and defeat the slash-and-burn cuts being enforced by TfL.

Unite relied on a group of "union activists" including Peter Skinner and Kevin Mustafa to head off rank-and-file opposition. Skinner defended Unite's pay deal, claiming the *World Socialist Web Site* was lying when it described the headline figure as "below-inflation" and a sell-out. They piled slander on the WSWS, attacking drivers for posting WSWS articles.

Unite reps at Brixton and elsewhere argued 3.5 percent should be accepted to focus on this year's pay fight, with activist James Rossi announcing that Sharon Graham's "bus combine" was launching the fight for a 15 percent increase. He described Graham as "a ray of light in the pitch-black darkness". Mustafa promoted "Sharon" as a clean broom sweeping away corruption and reclaiming the organisation for members.

All such claims have been shattered. Graham has continued Unite's pro-company agenda. For all her claims of a "rebirth of trade unionism", she has presided over hundreds of below-inflation pay deals, suppressed strikes and blocked united action across bus, rail and the London Underground.

The way forward

Massive strike mandates by rail, London Underground, BT and Royal Mail workers provide the opportunity to reverse decades of wage restraint and austerity. Workers are demanding action to deal with the biggest cost-of-living crisis in decades.

But across the London bus network, Unite is already back-pedalling on its pay claims for 15 percent. At the same time, Khan and TfL are enforcing historic cuts across London transport that have gone unchallenged. These cuts can only be defeated and a real pay rise won if workers organise a rank-and-file rebellion against Unite.

The Trades Union Congressand its affiliated unions are doing everything in their power to divide action and prevent a general strike that could bring down the Johnson government. They are not even calling for a general election, leaving 120,000 Tory party members to decide which Thatcherite will govern the country.

Starmer is trying to outdo the Tories, sacking MPs for attending picket lines, insisting Labour is the party of NATO and declaring that there is "no magic money tree" and workers must accept the need for sacrifice.

But when it comes to the bus and rail companies, the magic money has been endless. Since 2008, the Bank of England has pumped £895 billion into financial markets via "quantitative easing" to inflate profits and share prices. As a result, the UK has a record number of billionaires who have increased their wealth by £60 billion in the past year alone.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee urges drivers to vote 'NO' to any pay offer under 15 percent and to demand co-ordinated strike ballots for London-wide industrial action. The efforts of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union and Unite to divide bus, rail and underground workers must be defeated. Garages should organise delegations to visit pickets by rail and underground workers to show solidarity and discuss a common fight.

Delegations should also visit workers on indefinite strike at Arriva North West who are facing the same attacks on pay and conditions.

To lead this fight, independent rank-and-file committees are needed led by trusted militants that will place the interests of workers before company profits. The current pay claims must be redrawn to reflect the concerns of workers, including an end to divisive pay grades: one job, one wage across *all* operators.

Agency staff must be transferred in-house on full benefits; compulsory sick-pay must be available for all drivers from day one. Safety must be strictly enforced! Bans on all defective vehicles which place drivers and passengers at risk. We urge all bus workers who agree with this fight to **contact us** today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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