

London United bus drivers speak out ahead of this week's strike: "the pay offer is a joke"

Our reporters
14 August 2022

Bus drivers at London United are striking Friday and Saturday to demand a genuine cost-of-living pay rise. The drivers rejected a two-year below-inflation pay offer from the company last month of just 7.8 percent. Inflation is expected to reach 17 percent RPI by October, according to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research think tank.

More than 1,600 drivers will walk out at Fulwell, Hounslow, Hounslow Heath, Park Royal, Shepherd's Bush, Stamford Brook, and Tolworth garages. Members of Unite have so far rejected two below-inflation pay offers from London United, a subsidiary of French transport giant RATP.

While the company has cried poor, RATP recorded £174 million in profits in 2021 and received tens of millions in subsidies throughout the coronavirus pandemic. Its revised offer to drivers who risked their lives to run the service during lockdown was a miserly 3.6 percent in 2022 and 4.2 percent next year.

At Shepherd's Bush garage on Saturday, drivers condemned London United's two-year 7.8 percent pay offer as "an insult".

A driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The pay offer is a joke." He supported the strike but explained, "I'm not in the union. When you look at it, it's more like they're on the company's side than ours. When they talk to the company it's like they're sat down in front of the teacher."

He continued, "The company doesn't give a shit about us. For them it's all about profits. The temperature in the cabs today is over 41 degrees and there's no AC."

On Saturday, temperatures reached 37 degrees in London. At least 95 percent of London buses have no proper air-conditioning and drivers have protested in recent weeks, refusing to drive the defective vehicles

which pose a serious health and safety risk.

Another driver explained, "Even the brand-new buses have no AC. We only have an electric fan, circulating the hot air." At some garages, including Abellio's Battersea garage, drivers left their overheated vehicles on the side of the road, asserting their rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act.

David O'Sullivan, a Metroline bus driver who was sacked in February 2021 for warning his colleagues about an outbreak of COVID-19 infections at Cricklewood garage, spoke with drivers at Shepherd's Bush on Saturday. He explained how he was sacked for gross misconduct after citing his rights under Section 44. The acting Unite rep had submitted trumped-up evidence against him to management.

O'Sullivan encountered anger among drivers, who were scathing towards Unite's record of collusion with the bus companies over worsening conditions and pay. One driver commented wryly, "I heard that once a year the company takes the union out to a golf course."

Sharon Graham, Unite General Secretary, claims her union is leading a London-wide fight to win an inflation-busting pay increase. In reality, Unite is continuing its efforts to collude with the bus operators and Transport for London (TfL), dividing bus workers on a company-by-company basis. Unite upholds a patchwork of separate pay talks aimed at suppressing united action against the operators.

Unite is organising a series of local protests against TfL's plans to axe 16 bus routes and reduce a further 78 across London, a move that will hit the poor, elderly and disabled hardest. Unite's protests, dominated by union officials and Labour Party branches, are an exercise in political damage control. They have promoted Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan's phoney

“consultation survey” that is being used to decide which services should be cut. The protests amount to a political amnesty for Khan, while Unite suppresses any industrial action against the cuts.

This week’s action at London United will coincide with Friday’s one-day strike on the London Underground, and a one-day national rail strike on Saturday by members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) across Network Rail and 14 train operating companies.

London tube workers are fighting the destruction of jobs, conditions and pay as Khan enforces £2 billion worth of cuts by the Johnson government. National rail workers are fighting the Johnson government’s implementation of Great British Railways, a re-privatisation of train operating companies (TOCs) based on the elimination of thousands of jobs and the overhaul of employment contracts across Network Rail and the TOCs.

While rail workers are showing their determination to fight, the RMT and train drivers’ union ASLEF are working to head-off a developing strike wave, ensuring industrial action is divided along sectional lines and confined to one or two-day protests to prevent a direct political challenge to the Johnson government.

At Shepherd’s Bush, an engineer who will be joining this week’s strike explained, “The cost-of-living crisis has affected us everywhere. Every day is harder to make ends meet, every day something goes up—so how can we live on this wage?”

“I spend £40 every week on petrol just to get to work. That’s a massive amount of money that comes out of my wages, and this so-called pay rise will not even cover that. Even basic things like milk and other basic things have gone up. What is the outcome of this? When is this going to stop?”

“It looks like the tube and rail drivers are making a change. Rail workers seem to get what they want when they take action, and we have to do the same. If we fight together, we will have a big, big, big impact. And then the government will have to do something about this.

“It’s a very difficult situation. No one listens to us. Labour is not the labour party anymore and the unions don’t talk to us anymore but talk to the bosses. Even the drivers are divided. Some of them left the Unite union to join other unions. Some of them don’t have

any union at all. We are all divided. Look at the weather conditions! We’re still working on the bus. You’ve got fans but they blow hot air. How is that human?”

“I agree with having a rank-and-file committee of drivers. But we need to work hard to make it work. We will strike next week because we just can’t live in this money. We need a change, we really do.

“TFL are having a lot of trouble with these new fully electric buses with an advance driver assist system in them, which is very sensitive. When drivers touch the accelerator pedal it responds immediately, from 20 to 40 very quickly. But it is very hard to stop 12 and a half tons of bus quickly. So there has been a lot of accidents, which TFL are very quiet about.

“It does not help when drivers tell me the hours they are driving—it’s far too much. The conditions we face are all the same, and it’s going in the wrong direction.

“Now that the unions have woken up, all they want is to talk, talk, talk and nothing good comes out. I followed the Facebook groups [of bus workers] but they all seem to defend Sharon Graham, who has changed nothing as far as I can see.

“I agree with you about having a rank-and-file committee. But it’s got to be from ourselves because the unions don’t defend us. I will read with interest about all the strikes that are taking place. You say a general election should be called to fight back? That is correct but a large number of drivers and other workers would have to get involved to do this. I would support that.”



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