

London United bus drivers take second round of two-day strike action

“We are the ones making profits for them, we should be awarded a decent standard of living”

Tony Robson
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London United was hit by further strike action by around 1,600 bus drivers on Sunday and Bank Holiday Monday in their fight for a cost of living pay increase. This follows a two-day strike on August 19-20 by the members of Unite across seven garages in south and west London at Tolworth, Fulwell, Hounslow, Hounslow Heath, Park Royal, Shepherd's Bush and Stamford Brook.

Bus workers know that their pay struggles cannot be waged in isolation, especially as the strike action last year at London United, as part of other RATP subsidiaries, was the only one in London and ended in a sell-out miserly pay agreement.

David O'Sullivan from the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee spoke with drivers on the picket lines yesterday. At Park Royal garage a driver explained, “We all need a pay rise and levelling up. If I buy my morning coffee every day and we get 10 percent that will only pay for the coffee over the year. That is how low our wages have fallen.”

Another added, “I've worked for 20 years in the job and it was a lot easier and the pay was ok for the standard of living back then. Now everything is against us and everything is going up and we are going backwards. We get £30,000 to £31,000 a year and that is with overtime. The new drivers are really struggling on £12 an hour; that is why they are always short of drivers and agency workers are brought in at £20 an hour.

“At the end of the day, we do an important job but are not valued and are treated like the bottom of the pile. At the top, all they think about is making money, not

investing in the drivers. I am part of the union. I will fight for my rights. The thing is they are not on our side. There is nobody who represents us here, but we have to fight. Even the Labour Party does not defend us any more. Now they represent the rich.”

At Shepherd's Bush a driver discussed with O'Sullivan the issue of a rank-and-file committee: “I would like to know how this would work. We got 1.5 percent from the union last year and our strike was left completely isolated. We rejected so many pathetic revised offers this year. We need something different.”

London United drivers rejected the pay offer of 3.6 percent for 2022 and 4.2 percent for next year, voting in favour of strike action by an 89 percent majority in July. The parent company of London United, French-owned RATP Group, is demanding a de facto pay cut while pleading poverty as it rakes in profits of £174 million last year. The rate of inflation measured by the most accurate measure of RPI has climbed above 12 percent and is forecast to reach 21 percent in the first quarter of 2023.

Drivers defied the company by rejecting 2.5 percent for this year in January (described as a “final offer”) and in February voted by 90 percent for strike action. The current offer is the fourth rejected. This included the 3.2 percent in April which differed by just 0.1 percent from the second offer. Drivers viewed this as a slap in the face from the company and by Unite for treating it as a serious offer to vote on. For half the year Unite buried news of the dispute as it worked to isolate the strike action at Arriva London South (ALS). That dispute, which started in March and ended in May after

three days of strike action, was ended on a Unite-backed deal of 3.5 percent, well below inflation for the period

Unite's delaying tactics over the 2021-22 pay award were used to pressure drivers to accept this sell-out, but almost half the membership still voted against. The union justified the substandard deal by claiming it would clear the decks for an above inflation pay fight this year. Instead, a 10 percent settlement was accepted on August 26 after recommendation from the Unite negotiating team. To make matters worse, it is to be paid in two parts with 5 percent backdated to April 2 and the remaining 5 percent from July 30.

The deal was voted through at the four garages by 603 to 161—a turnout of 764 as compared to more than 1,000 bus workers engaged in the earlier strike action, demonstrating how Unite has alienated workers looking for a genuine fight.

The union has maintained separate pay negotiations with ALS and Arriva London North (ALN), emboldening ALN to not make any pay offer. A ballot of 1,400 bus drivers at ALN for strike action closed Friday.

Unite under General Secretary Sharon Graham is determined to keep the struggle of over 20,000 bus workers in the capital divided. As has been the case at Stagecoach, the union has worked to prevent strikes breaking out at the same time at Arriva. Where it has been obliged to sanction strike action after bus workers rejected insulting offers, it has ensured the isolation of one indefinite strike action after another. At Arriva Yorkshire and Arriva North West four-week strikes were ended based on below-inflation settlements of 9 and 11.1 percent. In both cases Unite instructed a return to work without bus workers viewing or voting on the deals beforehand.

At Go-Ahead subsidiary London General, bus workers at six garages in south London have voted down a pay offer of 9 percent. This is one of the company's five subsidiaries in London employing around 8,000 workers. Around 760 members of Unite rejected the proposal by an overall majority of 65 percent, with a higher level in some garages. Merton garage voted to reject by 84 percent, with 224 votes cast for and 44 against. Putney voted against by 110 to 15, an 88 percent majority.

At Metrolink Travel, workers at ten garages across

north and west London voted in a consultative ballot near unanimously on August 26 for strike action—by 1,320 votes to 10, against a pay offer of 4.5 percent with a further 1 percent in January. At four of the garages the vote was 100 percent.

Unite has used the consultative ballot to push strike action back further, with an official ballot now being arranged. In addition to the two-week notification period required after the result is announced, it means any action is excluded for around a month.

For all the talk by Graham about workers not paying for the pandemic and the failure of “Westminster parties,” Unite has supported the consultation exercise organised by the Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan over proposals to axe 16 routes and reduce a further 78 in the capital to meet the austerity measures demanded by the Tory government. A series of local protests have been organised to bolster this exercise, which will be used to decide where the axe will fall.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee has outlined a strategy to mobilise bus workers alongside rail and London Underground and other transport workers. This involves in an industrial and political offensive against wage suppression, attacks on terms and conditions and austerity demanded by the Tory government and aided by their Labour Party accomplices.

The struggle must be taken out of the hands of the Unite bureaucracy. The rank-and-file needs to draw up demands for a unified pay struggle, defending the interests of workers not the bottom line of the companies.



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