

Unite postpones London bus strikes out of respect for the Queen, puts below-inflation pay offer to members

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Unite has followed every other major trade union in responding to the death of Queen Elizabeth II by calling off strike action scheduled over the period of “national mourning” that runs until her state funeral on September 19.

On Monday Unite announced it was “postponing” strikes at London United by 1,600 bus drivers due this Thursday and Friday, part of a long-running fight for an above-inflation pay award.

Unite’s statement read: “Following the death of the Queen, and out of respect for the period of National Mourning, the industrial action due to take place on 15th and 16th of September 2022 will now be postponed. For the avoidance of doubt, you should report for all duties as normal.”

The queen’s death is being used to realise aims which the employers, Conservative government, Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (TUC) have been seeking for months: to get strikes off the agenda and suppress mounting opposition to the most ferocious attack on living standards since the Great Depression, being overseen by the Tory government and its new Prime Minister Liz Truss.

Unite has joined the RMT, ASLEF, TSSA, CWU and other unions in calling off strikes embracing more than 150,000 workers. They are helping to enforce a broader crackdown on democratic rights, with new laws being used to arrest people simply for expressing opposition to the monarchy. Sir Keir Starmer has banned Labour MPs from posting any messages on social media other than expressions of sympathy and support for the royal family.

This regime of “national mourning,” enforced through censorship and repression, is aimed against the

working class.

At London United, while Unite postponed this week’s strike action, it is proceeding to ballot drivers this Thursday on the company’s below-inflation pay offer of 10 percent, nearly 3 percent below August’s RPI inflation rate of 12.3 percent. Sharon Graham, prior to her election as general secretary, had declared that “anything below RPI is a pay cut.” This rhetoric has since evaporated.

The company’s headline figure of 10 percent is the usual smoke and mirrors. The deal consists of 10 percent for three months, from September 3 to December this year. The previous nine months, stretching from December 2021 to September 2, 2022, will attract just 9 percent, for a total pay award of 9.25 percent. No wonder company executives announced it was “Good News!” that Unite agreed to ballot its members on the deal.

The demands for “national unity” emanating from Tory and Labour politicians, church leaders, the media, armed forces, academics, and trade union bureaucrats are rank hypocrisy. While strikes have been cancelled, the British ruling class has not paused for one instant its own class war against the working class, nor its ruthless profiteering, nor its escalating military offensive against Russia in Ukraine that threatens to trigger nuclear war.

Rail workers and postal workers who were due to strike this week have angrily denounced the unions’ cancellation of their strikes. Comments left on the RMT’s social media accounts, that were later removed by the union, included:

“Are the attacks on workers’ rights being suspended also?”

“Sat in a messroom full of railway workers and they’re livid about this. Have the Tories stopped the attack on the workforce?”

“What, or who, does this serve? Was the queen known for being a longstanding supporter of transport workers? Why screw over your members on her account?”

The unions’ anti-democratic actions are not an aberration. Last week Unite, the RMT and GMB denounced wildcat strikes by North Sea oil and gas workers who were demanding a cost-of-living pay rise from companies which have raked in billions. The unions’ joint communique with the companies attacked the strikes as a “smash and grab job for short-term gains.”

The corporate trade unions and their wealthy executives feared the oil rig strikes would spark a broader rank-and-file movement under conditions of mounting class anger against the profiteering of the energy companies that is plunging millions into abject poverty.

The events of the past week underscore the need for rank-and-file committees in every workplace, enabling workers to take control of their own struggle, break the grip of the trade union bureaucracy, and launch an industrial and political campaign to unite the struggles of workers on the bus, rail, London Underground, post, BT, the ports and oil rigs into a common offensive.

In their insistence that workers cancel strikes out of respect for a monarch and unelected head of state—the embodiment of class and aristocratic privilege—Unite is spitting on the traditions of the workers’ movement.

It should be recalled that in 1937, 30,000 London bus workers led a 4-week strike during the coronation of Elizabeth II’s father, King George VI, demanding better working conditions and a reduction in the working day from 8 hours to 7 and a half. The Coronation Bus Strikes began on May 1, 1937, and continued in the face of a media barrage. The strike won the sympathy of Londoners during the Hungry Thirties, with the rank-and-file movement issuing strike bulletins, leaflets and pamphlets that were read by thousands.

Political leadership in that fight came from bus workers in the Communist Party, and the strikers’ determination reflected the socialist and revolutionary sentiments that animated the international workers’

movement in the first decades of the 20th century, inspired by the example of the Russian Revolution.

The strike was ultimately betrayed by Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU) general secretary Ernest Bevin, who ensured the struggle of bus workers was walled off from workers on the rail and London Underground. Having isolated and worn down the dispute, Bevin then moved to break up the rank-and-file organisations, dismissing its central leaders. The leadership of the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) refused to oppose Bevin’s actions, in keeping with its Popular Front policy of pursuing alliances with the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, and the rank-and-file movement was dissipated.

As socialist leader James Connolly wrote in 1910, following a visit to Ireland by King George V, “a people mentally poisoned by the adulation of royalty can never attain to that spirit of self-reliant democracy necessary for the attainment of social freedom. The mind accustomed to political kings can easily be reconciled to social kings—capitalist kings of the workshop, the mill, the railway, the ships and the docks. Thus coronation and king’s visits are by our astute never sleeping masters made into huge Imperialist propagandist campaigns in favour of political and social schemes against democracy. But if our masters and rulers are sleepless in their schemes against us, so we, rebels against their rule, must never sleep in our appeal to our fellows to maintain as publicly our belief in the dignity of our class—in the ultimate sovereignty of those who labour.”

London bus workers must reconquer the traditions of the socialist movement, including the courageous stand taken by workers during the Coronation bus strikes. This means opposing Unite’s insistence that workers bow to royalty, and their anti-democratic cancellation of strikes. It means ensuring that the interests of the working class and its independence from the ruling class are upheld at all times, rejecting the moralistic appeals, entreaties and censure of bourgeois public opinion.



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