

Unite declares “massive win” over below inflation agreement at London United after cancelling strikes

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London United bus workers voted on Thursday to accept a 9.25 percent pay award for this year. The agreement has been falsely presented as a 10 percent pay increase, but this only applies to the final three months, from December 2021 to 2022. For the remaining nine months, backpay is just 9 percent despite RPI inflation topping 12 percent in July.

Responsibility for the below inflation deal lies with Unite. Its officials never challenged the company's smoke and mirrors and have described the outcome as “a massive win.”

That the longest running pay dispute this year of bus drivers in the capital has been ended on company terms is down to Unite's role in isolating London United drivers from the remaining 20,000 bus drivers in the capital. On top of this, Unite deliberately ground down opposition through endless balloting over derisory offers. The final agreement is the sixth attempt at a revised offer to end drivers' fight for a genuine cost of living pay increase.

London United's parent company—French based RATP Group—raked in profits of £174 million last year. It had demanded a de facto pay cut since negotiations opened over the pay award. The starting rate for a driver is £12.12 an hour in the fourth most expensive city in the world.

Bus drivers' determination was evident from the start. As far back as January they rejected an insulting 2.5 percent which the company had defined as a “final offer”. In February, they voted for strike action but Unite continued to come back with paltry offers of 3.1 and then 3.2 percent. It was not until July that Unite balloted again for strike action. Around 1,600 drivers at the seven garages in west London waged two rounds of 48 hour strikes in August after they delivered an 89 percent mandate for action having rejected 7.8 percent for a two-year deal.

Unite suspended the third round of strikes scheduled for Thursday and Friday last week without any consultation with the membership, citing respect for the queen. The enforced state of mourning around the myth of national unity has been weaponised by all the trade unions to arrest a burgeoning strike movement. Unite joined with the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT), ASLEF and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) in summarily cancelling action. The union also cancelled strikes at Arriva The Shires and Kent by 1,500 bus workers.

This goes beyond bowing to the unelected head of state and embodiment of hereditary privilege. It has been used to neutralise support for a general strike as dissatisfaction brewed toward the staggered and isolated actions the unions have presided over. Prime Minister Liz Truss is widely viewed as heading an illegitimate government preparing to outlaw strikes as part of its class war agenda. Even prior to the queen's death, RMT leader Mick Lynch had called on rabid Thatcherite Truss to act in the “national interest”. The union bureaucracy issued desperate appeals to the Tories throughout the “summer of discontent”, acting to suppress a confrontation by the working class against the Johnson government.

Unite's cancellation of strike action to pave the way for a below inflation deal at London United shows how the unions are relied on to police workers' opposition. The official state mourning for the queen saw no let-up in Unite's collusion with the company to ram through a deal which sacrificed drivers' living standards.

Thursday's vote to accept the company's revised offer was carried by a majority of 73 percent, with 906 votes in favour and 328 against, from 1,235 ballot papers issued at all seven garages: Fulwell, Hounslow, Hounslow Heath, Park Royal, Shepherd's Bush, Tolworth and Stamford Brook. The margin for acceptance was lower at Stamford

Brook (56 percent) and at Shepherds Bush the deal was rejected by 78 percent with 35 in favour and 130 against.

The WSWS spoke to drivers at Shepherds Bush who voted against. One stated, “They tried to fool everyone by pushing the back pay as a lump sum but that is something we have earned and is well overdue anyway. There is something not right about the union. Every time they take us just there and then something happens. I think they are being paid backhanders if I’m perfectly honest.”

Prior to announcing the ballot, Unite oversaw a softening up exercise at the garages. Its newsletter “Garage Voice”, circulating after the queen’s death, made not a word of criticism of the subterfuge employed by RATP to promote the deal, even while admitting it did not meet the cost of living.

“Whilst the offer has not met RPI [inflation], it was felt that members should have a chance to review and feedback to their reps for their discussion,” Unite stated. It concluded that a union committee would meet to “discuss the next steps” and an update would follow.

This was aimed at throwing those opposed to the deal off guard as the union prepared to cancel the strikes and spring a ballot, which it did on Monday. The union was on the same page as management which greeted the “Good news”.

At Arriva North West and Arriva Yorkshire where bus workers mounted four weeks of all-out strikes, Unite instructed a return to work prior to holding the ballot over below-inflation deals that were ultimately rammed through. Any official strike action remains rigidly controlled by the union apparatus which is committed to hatching sell out deals with management to end workers’ resistance. London United bus workers have now had first hand experience of the role of General Secretary Sharon Graham who boasts of her close working relationship with the reps and has hailed every de facto pay cut agreement as a victory.

The role of Unite in imposing pro-company divisions across workers’ pay struggles was underlined by the announcement on Friday that Arriva London North (ALN) drivers had resoundingly rejected a 11.2 percent offer. This shows the potential that has existed throughout the year for a London-wide fight—a desire to fight that Unite has systematically sabotaged. A majority of 89 percent of ALN drivers rejected the company’s offer, with 1,111 votes against and 122 in favour. Unite’s two-faced role was summed up by its description of the company offer as “high value”, dispensing with all pretence of fighting to meet its original pay claim of 15

percent as demanded by members.

The rejection at ALN owes everything to the drivers, not Unite. Many drivers pointed out that the company’s 11.2 percent offer worked out at 8.6 percent because of a 5 percent component in the backdated pay. Unite made no public announcement on the vote for strike action weeks ago, clearly hoping they would succeed in pushing through the company deal.

As the WSWS explained over Unite’s cancellation of strikes at London United: “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.”

Bus and rail workers should take as their example the Railroad Workers Rank and File Committee in the United States which last week organised an online meeting of 500 railway workers to fight to exercise their mandate for strike action. The meeting proceeded in defiance of secret talks between the unions, railroad companies and the Biden administration to block a strike by 100,000 railroad workers against a concessions contract and plans to outlaw strikes. This fightback is being organised as part of the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and- File Committees to which the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is affiliated. We urge bus workers to make contact and discuss how this can be taken forward.



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