

Arriva London North bus drivers to strike indefinitely from October as Unite prevents city-wide pay fight

Tony Robson
23 September 2022

Around 2,000 bus drivers at Arriva London North (ALN) are set to begin indefinite strike action at the start of October after rejecting a headline 11.2 percent pay offer for this year.

The strike action is scheduled to begin October 4 and covers all eight of ALN's garages across east and north London: Ash Grove, Barking, Clapton, Edmonton, Enfield, Palmers Green, Tottenham and Wood Green.

ALN is a division of Arriva UK Bus which runs 18 percent of bus services across London, operating a total of 100 routes. The industrial action will reportedly affect at least 40 routes. Parent company Deutsche Bahn is highly profitable, seeing revenue rise by 18.4 percent in 2021 to €47.3 billion, with net profit of €5 billion.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, "Our members at Arriva have generated huge profits for the company for decades. Arriva can afford to offer a pay increase that meets the real rate of inflation, but it has put profits before people and declined to do so. Unite will leave no stone unturned in the support given to our members during this dispute."

Her words are a fraud. Arriva UK Bus has been in the eye of a storm of strike action by bus workers across the country since last Autumn but Unite has isolated different groups of workers while enforcing below-inflation deals. The most recent examples are the four-week strikes at Arriva Yorkshire and Arriva North West, ended by Unite on pay deals drawn up between the union and management of 9 percent and 11.1 percent respectively. Inflation reached 12.3 percent in July.

The strike action at ALN is proceeding only because Unite and management's backroom manoeuvres to prevent it failed. The union published a press release in early August stating that ALN drivers were being balloted over strike action after the company "failed to make a pay

offer for 2022". The ballot closed on August 26 but there was no further public announcement on the strike mandate, described by drivers as resounding.

Unite then brought the 11.2 percent offer to a ballot, despite it being well below the 15 percent the union acknowledged it had been mandated by the membership to demand.

While the union dare not openly recommend the company's offer, it described the proposal as "high value" in an underhand bid to push the deal across the line. It was left to drivers to see through the usual smoke and mirrors, pointing out the pay rise equated to just 8.2 percent due to an inferior level of backpay. The offer was voted down on September 16 by an 89 percent majority by 1,111 votes to 122.

The pay negotiations are a joint company-union conspiracy designed to prevent a genuine pay fight from breaking out which would spread across the 20,000 bus drivers in the capital.

Since the cost-of-living crisis deepened in spring, Unite's role has been to facilitate a policy of divide and conquer by the private bus operators against workers' pay struggles.

Strike action by over 1,000 drivers at Arriva London South this April was viewed as the start of an overdue fightback. This was taken off the agenda based on a Unite-backed deal of 3.5 percent in May—well below the inflation rate of 7 percent for the period covered. This was followed by a below-inflation deal of just 10 percent for this year; in reality even lower as it is based on back pay of just 5 percent from April to the end of July. The company praised Unite for its "constructive" approach.

At London United the union has ended the longest running pay dispute in the capital this year by 1,600 drivers with a pay award which equates to just 9.25

percent, described by Unite as a “massive win”. The union did not report on the dispute for half a year as it brought back one insulting offer after another and sat on a strike mandate from February.

As with all the unions, Unite seized on the queen’s death as an excuse to end industrial action. After two rounds of 48-hour stoppages in August it cancelled the third round planned for last week to push through a below-inflation deal on the sixth attempt.

Unite continues to suppress a highly combative mood among workers, ensuring the company divisions are upheld and action prevented which would have seen thousands of bus workers across the London network on strike by now.

At Metroline Travel, an offer of 4.5 percent for this year with a further 1 percent in January was emphatically rejected by workers at 10 garages across north and west London. The strike ballot on August 26 recorded a near unanimous mandate for action of 1,320 to just 10 votes. Unite ensured this was a non-binding “consultative” ballot. Instead of moving to a full industrial ballot, the union delayed, meeting with management on September 15 to receive a minorly improved offer of 3 percent for next January. Unite is only now speaking of arranging a full strike ballot, months later.

At Go-Ahead-owned London General—one of the company’s five subsidiaries in London employing around 8,000 workers—bus workers at six garages in south London voted down a pay offer of 9 percent on August 23. Around 760 members of Unite rejected the proposal by an overall majority of 65 percent, higher in some garages. Merton garage voted 84 percent (224 vs 44 votes) against. The company confirmed on August 30 that this was its final offer. Unite had responded by using anti-strike legislation to browbeat and demoralise bus drivers, declaring, “Assuming there are no delays, legal challenges or major issues the process can take a minimum of 6 weeks before any action can be taken.”

In their fight for a pay increase London bus workers confront a union apparatus—headed by Graham and supported by a network of regional and local reps—which is dedicated to smothering opposition and strivings for joint action in the rank-and-file.

In return for revised but still below-inflation pay deals, Unite is renewing its sweetheart status with the private operators behind a smokescreen of lies about pay “victories”.

In the latest *Guardian* puff piece promoting Graham, the newspaper claims the general secretary has “presided

over 450 disputes over the last 12 months and counted the outcome on pay as a win in 80 percent of cases.”

The criteria for the so-called “wins” are never spelt out. As the WSWS has consistently exposed in one major dispute after another—in transport, warehousing and logistics, manufacturing and the oil industry—pay deals below RPI inflation have been hailed by Graham as “victories”, contrary to her stated position that anything below this benchmark is a pay cut. Workers can only guess how bad the results of the other 20 percent of disputes are.

The role of the Unite leader as British capitalism’s chief industrial fire fighter is coming into sharp focus. Graham’s suppression of the strike movement goes hand-in-hand with her pitiful appeals to the Labour Party as workers in their millions recognise it for the class enemy it is. “I think,” says Graham, “I really hope there will be a clear dividing line that begins to open up between Labour and the Conservatives that people will really begin to see it.”

Bus workers must take up a joint industrial and political offensive against the Truss government and its Labour accomplices. They must throw off the restraints put on their struggles by the union bureaucracy, which functions as an industrial police force.

The cycle of divided disputes and company-union substandard pay deals can only be broken through the formation of rank-and-file committees to unshackle the social power of the working class. Those who produce the profits must have their say on how they are distributed. For a start, to fund inflation-busting pay rises rather than the pittance Arriva and the private operators deem reasonable. This is the perspective advanced by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee. We appeal to all bus drivers to contact us to share their experiences and discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact