

Vote No at Arriva London North: take the dispute out of the hands of Unite's pro-company officials!

Statement by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
27 September 2022

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee calls for an emphatic “No” vote at Arriva London North (ALN) against Unite’s insistence that workers accept a revised below-inflation pay offer of 11 percent in a ballot this Thursday.

The Unite negotiating team has “fully recommended” a substandard offer of 11 percent, despite inflation reaching 12.3 percent RPI back in July. Inflation is set to rise further, with the British pound falling to a 37-year low that will push up prices for imported food, fuel and other essentials.

We stand in solidarity with drivers who have angrily denounced the pay deal on social media, citing the cost-of-living crisis and the crushingly long hours we are forced to work due to years of wage suppression overseen by Unite. To reject this deal means taking the dispute out of the hands of Unite’s officials who work hand-in-glove with the bus operators and Transport for London (TfL).

Based on its “fully recommended” pay cut, Unite unilaterally suspended an indefinite strike by 2,000 ALN drivers from October 4. The reps have shamelessly repudiated the 15 percent pay claim they said they were committed to just a few short months ago. Unite official Steven Stockwell described the strike’s suspension as an “act of goodwill”, demonstrating the union’s loyalty is to the company not drivers.

Unite justifies its endless re-balloting of substandard offers by claiming it is allowing the membership to decide. This is a deliberate strategy aimed at wearing drivers down. When it comes to cancelling strikes, Unite are the experts and democracy counts for nothing.

At Arriva London North the gulf separating drivers from Unite’s officials and reps is out in the open. ALN drivers already rejected an offer of 11.2 percent on September 16 which the negotiating team brought back for a vote with the immortal words that the deal was “high value”. The membership delivered their own verdict, voting it down by 1,111 votes to 122. Drivers exposed how the 11.2 percent headline figure was a fraud, and that with reduced backpay it meant the real offer was only 8.25 percent.

The revised offer still includes reduced back pay, albeit this time a 10 percent increase from April 2 to October 14, with the 11 percent only applying from October 15.

Arriva executives were in a vulnerable position after drivers rejected their offer on September 16 and they relied on Unite to come to their rescue. The union resumed closed-door talks with management to repackage the offer and block industrial action. They accept Arriva’s claim that it “cannot afford” to pay more, despite parent company Deutsche Bahn growing revenue by 18.4 percent last year to €47.3 billion, with net profit of €5 billion.

Unite’s actions at ALN are a devastating exposure of the small band of “activists” including Peter Skinner, Kevin Mustafa and James Rossi who have claimed that under Sharon Graham’s leadership the union is being transformed into a member-led organisation.

In a video released just weeks ago, Graham promised to put a “stake in the ground” citing strike action at London United and balloting underway at ALN, creating the impression they would be joined by Abellio, Metrolink and Stagecoach. She stated: “Now is the time for action and it will take action to win.”

Unite's "activists" have promoted this garbage, claiming just a few days ago that "Sharon and her Team" have "empowered" drivers to fight. Her Unite bus "combine", they claimed, would lead a co-ordinated campaign for an inflation-busting pay raise. The reality has been more of the same: dividing workers in separate pay talks, endless balloting, and more below-inflation offers sold to members as "the best we are going to get". Examples include:

London United: Unite suspended strikes by 1,600 drivers as a mark of respect for the Queen, while still balloting on a revised company offer worth 9.25 percent, which Unite described as a "pay rise victory."

Arriva The Shires: Unite suspended strike action by 900 bus workers as a mark of respect for the Queen but used the period of official mourning to push through a deal of between 10.4 and 11.1 percent, trampling drivers' demand for pay parity.

Arriva Yorkshire and Arriva North West: Unite ended four weeks of strike action based on pay deals of 9 percent and 11.1 percent respectively. In both instances Unite ended the strikes prior to bus workers viewing the revised offers or voting on the deals Unite had drawn up with management.

Arriva London South: Unite ended the strike by 1,000 drivers after three days, backing a 3.5 percent offer for 2021/2. Next, the union prevented further action by supporting a 10 percent deal for this year. But it works out even less due to reduced back pay of 5 percent between April and the end of July, and 5 percent thereafter.

A new strategy is needed to break this chain of defeats.

1. The negotiating committee at ALN has lost all authority and cannot lay claim to acting in your interests. It deserves to be stood down through a motion of no confidence.

2. Rank-and-file committees must be established at each garage to coordinate action and draw up demands reflecting the will of the majority for an above-inflation pay raise and other urgent improvements for drivers' safety and wellbeing.

3. It is time for coordinated action by London's 20,000+ bus drivers, including those as Go Ahead, Metrolink and Abellio, where action is being divided and stalled.

4. All negotiations must be placed under the direct

control of the rank-and-file, with talks livestreamed.

ALN bus drivers are not alone. Workers across Britain are being drawn into struggle against a Truss government that is preparing to outlaw strikes and whose class war mini budget on Friday announced an unprecedented transfer of wealth to the super rich. The growing strike wave is part of an international upsurge of the working class against decades of wage suppression and a free market rampage enforced by the pro-company trade unions.

Rank-and-file organisation is not only possible—it is already happening. Strikes on North Sea oil rigs in May and September were organised by the Offshore Oil and Gas Workers Strike Committee, which issued a statement explaining, "The wildcat strikes that are being talked about and planned are a result of years of inaction from the unions and our employers and have made us feel like we can only get things done by taking things into our own hands... The whole of the UK is up in arms about the cost of living. We are no different."

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). In America, rank-and-file committees are being established among hundreds of railway workers against unions working hand in glove with the Biden administration to enforce a concessions contract and block strikes mandated by 100,000 workers across the network. The IWA-RFC is also supporting Will Lehman as candidate for president of the United Auto Workers union based on a platform of abolishing the bureaucracy and placing the rank and file in power.

Vote "No" to this sell-out deal and join with us to build new democratic and fighting organisations of struggle as part of this growing international fightback by the working class.



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