

Open letter to Arriva London North drivers

London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
3 October 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee sends its solidarity to all drivers and engineers at Arriva London North.

We congratulate the hundreds of drivers who stood up and voted No to the below-inflation deal of 11 percent “fully recommended” by Unite’s negotiating committee. You refused to buckle in the face of a campaign of deceit and intimidation by Unite officials that this was the best possible offer, while they decried strike action against the deal as “reckless”.

For most drivers who voted Yes, this was not a sign of contentment. It was a show of no-confidence in the union fighting for anything better. With bills piling up, many saw no alternative.

The acceptance margin of just 56 percent shows Unite’s collusion and control rests on shaky grounds.

The division is NOT between those who voted for the deal and those who voted against. The real division is between the rank-and-file and the union bureaucrats. Unite bounced drivers into a ballot after repackaging a rotten offer which was already roundly rejected on September 16.

Arriva drivers have shared videos and WhatsApp messages that expose Unite’s portrayal of a “good deal”, showing how drivers will be worse off. This shows why the rank-and-file should be in charge of negotiations, not Unite reps who act like poodles for the company.

Unite was even prepared to accept a lower pay increase going forward, from 11.2 to 11 percent, in return for upping the lower level of backpay from 5 to 10 percent. This still robbed you, even of the inadequate headline figure that is well below inflation at 12.3 percent RPI in July. Inflation is set to rise with the pound’s collapse, pushing up prices of imported food, energy and other essentials.

Unite routinely claims they are “letting the members decide” when they re-ballot endlessly over substandard pay deals. But at ALN this pretence was cast aside as Unite’s negotiating team stated in writing that they were

“fully recommending” the deal.

Unite represents the company not the interests of its members. It was under no legal obligation to call off the October 4 strike at ALN. They overturned your democratic strike mandate for the sole purpose of pushing a pay deal that saves the company’s bottom line.

Unite’s “activists” exposed

The sell-out pay deal at ALN has exposed Unite’s “activists”, including Peter Skinner, Kevin Mustafa and James Rossi, who have conducted a charm offensive for General Secretary Sharon Graham, claiming she is “a breath of fresh air” making Unite a “member-led union” and similar nonsense.

During the Arriva London South dispute in May this year, which ended in a below-inflation deal of 3.5 percent, these Unite “activists” claimed that Graham’s new “bus reps combine” was launching a “coordinated” campaign across London for a 15 percent pay rise. Predictably, as soon as Unite entered closed-door talks with the company, all talk of 15 percent vanished.

The only campaign Unite has coordinated is one of division, isolating drivers through separate pay talks, even in separate subsidiaries of the same company. Their divide and conquer tactics have delivered below-inflation deals at Arriva London South, London United and now ALN.

Unite’s below-inflation deal at ALN, and the opposition to this by hundreds of drivers, shows why Unite’s “activists” have devoted so much energy to slandering the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) as “anti-union”. For months they have pounced on drivers who share our statements on Facebook and WhatsApp trying to create a climate of political intimidation to protect Unite from the rank-and-file.

We urge drivers to speak up and oppose their unprincipled efforts to suppress free speech.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is fighting to abolish the union bureaucracy and put rank-and-file workers in charge. We believe that all decisions on pay and conditions should be decided on the shop floor, not by Unite officials and reps in closed door talks with company executives. Drivers' interests should come first, not company shareholders and private equity investors.

If that is "anti-union" it only shows how far the unions have travelled from their original aims.

Rank-and-File committees

The working class faces an escalating cost-of-living crisis. On Saturday the latest energy price hike took effect, with annual fuel bills reaching an average of £2,500. Inflation is predicted to rise as the collapse of the pound pushes up prices for imported goods including, food, fuel, and much more. The Bank of England has signalled further interest rate rises are imminent, pushing up mortgage repayments and rent. Many drivers are already working the maximum legal limit just to survive.

Drivers have contacted the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee to ask about the aims of the rank-and-file movement and how to set up such a committee at their own garage.

The aims of the rank-and-file movement are:

1. Abolish the bureaucracy and put the rank-and-file in charge
2. Workers' control of union assets, including strike pay
3. All decisions about pay and conditions to be decided on the shop floor
4. No closed-door talks; all negotiations to be livestreamed
5. Defence of pay, conditions and safety over profits
6. Unify drivers across London for combined action
7. Build links with rail, tube and other workers in the UK and globally

As we know from the pandemic, it is workers who produce all the wealth and who keep society moving. We are the ones with the power, but this is being suppressed by unions that work as junior partners of the bus companies and the government.

Rank-and-file committees will provide the means for

the working class to fight back and organise a united struggle for our own interests.

Any driver can start a rank-and-file committee at their garage. To begin with, draw up a founding statement with some like-minded colleagues, listing your aims and objectives, and then fight to win support. The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee can help any drivers who want to begin such a fight. The rank-and-file movement is open to all workers whether they are in the union or not. It unites workers based on their common class objectives, irrespective of nationality, gender, religion or other superficial differences.

The primary lesson from the dispute at ALN is the need for workers to start taking matters into their own hands. Drivers are not alone. They have powerful allies as shown in the growing strike wave amid the deepest collapse of world capitalism since the 1930s. In the United States, the biggest strike wave in four decades is underway, with the rank-and-file movement growing in strength, as shown in the campaign by rank-and-file leader and socialist Will Lehman for UAW president and the growth of rank-and-file committees among railway workers.

In both countries workers face governments resorting to anti-strike legislation to push through the mass impoverishment of workers to ramp up corporate profits and pay for the disastrous NATO war against Russia. While Truss and the Tories ram through tax cuts for the billionaires, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer denounces strikes and calls for "hard graft" in "the national interest".

The social power of the working class can only be unlocked through a frontal assault on the dictatorship of corporate and financial elite, based upon the reorganisation of society to provide for human need not the accumulation of wealth by a parasitic handful.

We urge bus drivers who want to take up this fight to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee. Email: londonbusrankandfile@protonmail.com



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact