

UK: Unite secures acceptance of below-inflation pay deal at Go-Ahead London buses

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A below-inflation 10.5 percent pay offer from Go-Ahead bus company, recommended by Unite officials, was accepted by London bus drivers in a ballot last Thursday, with 1,275 drivers voting yes, and 282 drivers voting no.

At Go-Ahead London General, covering Merton, Putney, Stockwell, Sutton, Waterloo and Waterside Way garages, 703 voted in favour and 105 against. At London Central's Bexleyheath, Camberwell, New Cross, Peckham and Morden Wharf garages, 572 voted in favour, with 177 rejecting.

The highest no votes were recorded at Stockwell (162 yes; 61 no), Merton (202 yes; 61 no) and Peckham (57 yes; 41 no). In total, 1,565 drivers voted on the pay deal (8 ballot papers were spoilt). Go-Ahead employs 8,000 bus workers at its garages across London.

The overwhelming yes vote is the result of months-long efforts by Unite officials to wear down workers' demands for London-wide action to win a genuine cost-of-living pay increase. With strikes on the London Underground and railways, bus drivers in London had called for unified action to take on the bus operators and Transport for London. Below-inflation pay offers have been repeatedly rejected.

Unite has worked to divide drivers company-by-company. At Go-Ahead, Unite officials colluded with the company to string out pay talks. On July 15, after the anniversary pay date had already expired, Unite's Negotiating Committee announced it had agreed to postpone talks "due to the uncertainty of the takeover of the company, as well as current negotiations with TfL [Transport for London]."

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee replied, "Unite's reps are in so deep with the company that they unashamedly ask workers to delay their pay claim, amid the biggest cost-of-living squeeze in decades, to

help with Go-Ahead's friendly takeover by asset strippers!"

Drivers rejected an initial company offer of just 9 percent, which Unite agreed to ballot its members on after dumping its claim for an "RPI + pay raise". The union responded to the rejection vote with further dirty tactics, refusing to trigger a strike ballot. Instead, reps on the Negotiating Committee agreed to delay pay talks yet again, this time because Go-Ahead Managing Director John Trayner was on holiday.

Unite's refusal to hold a strike ballot at Go-Ahead was no accident. With rank-and-file workers starting to organise at Go-Ahead, Unite feared a strike there could become a rallying point for drivers across London.

In his letter to Unite official Bruce Swann on October 6, Trayner warmly thanked Unite for its "constructive manner" during the pay talks. He noted Swann's agreement that the union's Negotiating Committee would be "recommending for acceptance" of 10.5 percent, with reps stood down to "explain the context of the offer".

The lead-up to the ballot saw a massive campaign by Unite officials and reps declaring that 10.5 percent was "the best you are going to get". They warned that industrial action could see Go-Ahead's offer withdrawn. Unite's deliberate failure to secure a strike ballot meant that any no vote would force drivers to strike in the run-up to Christmas. With cost-of-living pressures mounting, many drivers looked to the back pay element of the deal to tide them over the festive season.

Last Sunday, the Merton Garage Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement urging drivers to vote no. It called for a vote of no-confidence in Unite's Negotiating Committee, joint balloting at Metroline, Abellio and Go-Ahead to fight for an above-inflation

pay rise, and rank-and-file control over all negotiations with the company.

The stand taken by drivers at Merton garage paves the way for the next stage of struggle.

With inflation at 12.3 percent--and set to remain high throughout 2023--and with further interest rate hikes pushing up mortgage repayments and rent, Unite's below-inflation pay deal with Go-Ahead ensures that workers will face ongoing financial hardship. Many drivers are already working huge levels of overtime just to stay afloat.

The vote at Go-Ahead is largely a vote of no-confidence in Unite. By declaring its deal with Go-Ahead the "best offer possible", Unite officials tried to drive home the message that any further struggle was futile, even self-defeating. Many drivers recognise that Unite stands with the company and will have voted yes with gritted teeth.

In recent days, WSWS spoke with drivers at Go-Ahead about their thoughts on the pay deal and its acceptance. A longstanding driver from Merton garage described the pay deal as "shameful really, and the same goes for the way Unite handled the negotiations and herded members towards acceptance."

Another Merton driver agreed, "This is what the union do, divide drivers to win. They've been at it for years now! If you like, they are the police of the company to keep workers in line... Solidarity is what's needed, stick together and the fight goes on as far as I'm concerned."

A newer driver at Go-Ahead, also from Merton, highlighted Unite's role in pushing completely different pay deals across the UK, "At Arriva North Kent the starting offer on the table is 10 percent [which has been rejected] ... so how did you guys get to that conclusion?" Drivers at Arriva North Kent have already taken six days of strike action, with thirteen more to follow.

He continued, "My argument is that if you are my union rep, and you turn around and tell me that 10.5 percent is the best that you can get, then if drivers vote to reject that offer, will you be prepared to fight for that?"

"What irritated me most was that straight after the negotiations when they came up with the 10.5 percent, the union reps were in the output [where drivers sign-on for duty] and he's talking about the deal and how

good it is. In my opinion he was influencing the vote and brainwashing these guys.

"I understand there's a lot of guys who work overtime and live pay check to pay check. But that is not going away. The cost of living is going to go up. If they'd come in at 13 percent, then I would have thought that is a good deal. But to go from 9 percent to 10.5 – and that's the best there is? I just didn't buy it.

"The union is supposed to be neutral, but the way it came after the negotiations is that the union was talking *for the company*, instead of talking *for us* to the company. Their negotiations were one-sided, and not one-sided in our defence. One-sided against us! They speak for the company, by the sounds of things."

Unite's efforts to ram through below-inflation pay deals amid a cost-of-living emergency is now proceeding at Metroline. There Unite has brought back an offer based on 10 percent for the top two grades only, and just 9 percent for all other drivers. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate Unite's role in dividing drivers, not only on a company-by-company basis, but grade against grade within the same company.

The central lesson from the aborted struggle at Go-Ahead is the need for workers to take matters into their own hands and prepare a fightback against Unite's pro-company and corporatist apparatus. Rank-and-file committees should be established at the garages, forging links with drivers at all companies, and among workers on the London Underground, rail, post and BT.



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