

Vote No to Metroline's below-inflation pay offer!

For rank-and-file control over negotiations and joint strike action with Abellio drivers!

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The London Bus Rank and File Committee (LBRC) issued an urgent statement Tuesday calling on Metroline drivers to reject the latest revised below-inflation pay offer from the company brought back by the Unite negotiating committee for a vote this Friday.

As soon as the offer's contents became available it was clear it amounts to a pay cut in real terms, with a 10 percent increase going forward, and a back pay rate of just 9 percent from April. The RPI inflation rate on the anniversary date had already reached 11.1 percent and has continued climbing to its current rate of 12.6 percent. The starting rate for Metroline drivers is as low as £12.35 an hour.

The pay offer ballot announced by Unite was sprung on drivers at 14 garages across north and west London before any details had been released. It has been timed to pre-empt a month-long ballot for strike action by 2,500 members that closes Friday.

The pattern of company-union collusion was set from the start of negotiations over this year's pay award. Unite has stifled strike action. It organised a non-binding consultative vote in late August over an offer worth less than half the rate of inflation, just 4.5 percent this year and an additional 1 percent in January. Drivers at Metroline Travel's ten garages voted near unanimously for strike action.

It was not until October 10 that Unite began the process of balloting on strike action, while continuing to bring back under-inflation offers.

The first was a divisive offer of 10 percent for the top two driver grades and 9 percent for all other drivers, with 9 percent back pay across the board. This followed

talks with the company on October 11.

Unite's negotiating team backtracked over that offer in the face of drivers' anger and cancelled the vote scheduled for October 21. It issued a notice saying, "Unite pay committee held an emergency meeting yesterday following talk back sessions. We have decided not to go ahead with the vote on the pay offer this Friday."

After this U-turn, Unite announced they would resume talks with management and urged drivers to vote in the ballot for industrial action. Having delayed the strike ballot for months, Unite's aim was to wear down opposition by hatching yet another sell-out proposal.

Calling on Tuesday for a rejection of the latest offer, the LBRCFC opposed Unite's attempt to railroad drivers into voting on yet another shoddy deal, in what amounts to a conspiracy between the union and company to foist below-inflation pay deals across London on a company-by-company basis. The rank-and-file statement shared on social media stated:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Unite is trying to bulldoze Metroline drivers into voting for a company offer that has not even been put in writing!

On Monday, Metroline praised its 'productive meeting with Unite' and announced that 'Your reps will be available in the garages this Wednesday to present the offer.'

Unite convenor Donald Palmer announced

that drivers will vote on the company's offer less than 48-hours later--yet he refused to even reveal what the pay offer is!

Unite's actions are an affront to the democratic rights of all members, with reps who act like errand boys for the company.

Drivers should demand that any vote on this offer be postponed until next week, after ALL drivers have been given time to review the offer IN FULL.

Metroline and Unite are up to their usual tricks. They are trying to push through a below inflation pay deal before the strike ballot closes on Friday. This is part of a divide and conquer strategy.

Drivers at Abellio are taking ten days of strikes from November 22. The company and Unite are trying to block joint action, just like they've been doing all year, Enough is enough!

REJECT THE COMPANY OFFER!

DEFEAT UNITE'S ANTI-DEMOCRATIC PRO-COMPANY TACTICS!

Within hours of this statement being shared among drivers Unite reps who had taken part in negotiations with Metroline were promoted as opposing the offer. A notice circulated by Unite's reps was headlined "Reject the pay cut." But they are unable to answer the obvious question: Why has an offer which they admit was "mostly UNCHANGED" and a "real terms pay cut" been rushed through for a vote?

Their statement cites a strike ballot of Metroline engineers and strike action scheduled at London bus company Abellio, stating: "it's time to unite and fight together."

It's been time to "fight together" all year! Amid the biggest cost-of-living crisis in decades, drivers began demanding London-wide action months ago.

In the hands of Unite officials, strike mandates have been used solely as a bargaining chip to avoid any unified action. At Metroline, Unite's reps are citing favourably the hourly rate of pay for senior drivers at Go Ahead, without mentioning the below-inflation deal Unite pushed through there of just 10.5 percent (i.e., a pay cut). Drivers at the company had already rejected 9 per cent but Unite blocked a ballot for strike action.

Six months ago, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and her "activists" and reps claimed that Unite would launch co-ordinated action across London for a 15 percent "inflation-busting pay rise". These claims lie in tatters. Unite's officials have rammed through a string of below-inflation pay deals through company-by-company agreements, overseeing wage suppression for the operators.

Metroline--owned by Singapore-based transport giant ComfortDelGro--can plead poverty and string out negotiations because it has the union bureaucracy in its back pocket. ComfortDelGro reported a 114 percent increase in earnings last year to December of \$130.1 million with revenue increasing by 9.1 percent to \$3.5 billion. Its public transport business posted a 5.3 per cent rise in operating profit to \$130.7 million.

On the back of further profits this year the company chair, Lim Jit Poh stated: "The group is in a fortunate position to have a strong cash flow and be in a net cash position. As such, we do not have any problem funding our dividend payouts internally." The group announced that its half yearly profits this year increased by 30.4 percent largely due to a "one-off exceptional gain" of \$30.5 million "from the disposal of the Alperton property in London" which will fund a special dividend, the first since 2007. This is a reference to the closure of the Alperton bus garage in west London last September after the sale of the site to major real estate developers.

In opposition to the company's rampant profiteering and asset-stripping, Metroline workers must take the fight out of the hands of Unite's officials, conveners and reps who operate as an arm of management. Rank and file committees, representing all drivers, should formulate pay demands and other claims for improved conditions. All negotiations must be controlled by the rank-and-file. The starting point for talks must be what bus drivers and engineers need, not what the companies claim is "affordable" to protect their continued plundering for shareholders.



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