

Metroline bus drivers in London vote to strike, rejecting below-inflation pay offers

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Metroline drivers across north and west London have rejected a revised below-inflation pay offer from the company by an overwhelming majority of 75.6 percent, in a consultative ballot held by Unite on Friday.

The offer for this year's pay award, delayed since May, was 9 percent backdated and 10 percent from settlement date. The RPI rate of inflation had already exceeded 11 percent on the anniversary date and has since climbed to 12.6 percent.

The offer included closure of pay progression for drivers moving to the top two pay grades from 2025.

Ten garages were balloted: Brentford, Cricklewood, Edgware, Harrow Weald, Holloway, Kings Cross, Perivale, Potters Bar, Willesden and Lampton. A total of 1,552 papers were issued, with 1,168 voting against and 335 voting for and 6 votes spoilt. Only Edgware voted in favour--by a solitary vote. At four garages the rejection level was above 90 percent: Harrow Weald, Kings Cross, Perivale and Lampton.

A Metroline driver from north London told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I rejected this below inflation offer. We should be demanding 15 percent, I would reject anything less. It is no longer possible for a family with two wage earners to get by. Some workers on the buses left their home country to escape these conditions.

"We have seen our energy and grocery bills increase by around 30 percent. ComfortDelGro [parent company] is profitable, they just want to make things more attractive for the shareholders. Across the world there is not a country where they have not made profits, and this is from the workers who have produced them. But they will not pay us enough to live a decent life.

"I don't think the union should have brought this back for a vote. The company also wanted to close off pay progression by 2025 for drivers to reach the top level. If they were really a union, on worker's side,

they would not have done that. This offer should have never left the room. The previous offer was very divisive, pitting drivers from different grades against each other.

"I was surprised at the size of the vote to reject. We should be out with Abellio drivers. The private operators stick together, and they make sure any strike action is covered by each other and get paid for it by Transport for London. We should stand together."

The vote is not only a massive repudiation of Metroline's insulting offer, but an indictment of Unite's negotiating committee for bringing such a contemptible deal back to the membership. It is a tactic routinely used by Unite to wear down opposition.

Ahead of last week's vote, Metroline had praised a "productive meeting" with Unite on Monday November 7. Union convenor Donald Palmer announced that garage meetings would be held two days later to discuss the deal it cooked up with the company, leaving drivers less than 48 hours to consider its contents.

The offer was rushed to a vote on the same day a month-long strike ballot closed. As expected, every garage recorded a mandate for strike action of over 90 percent, reaching 100 percent in one case.

The London Bus Rank and File Committee (LBRFC) issued a direct appeal for a No vote last Tuesday, describing the rush to vote on the deal by the Unite negotiating committee as an "affront to democratic rights". The appeal urged, "Reject the company offer! Defeat Unite's pro-company anti-democratic tactics!"

The belated official call for a No vote by Unite was to cover their tracks and keep control of the dispute.

Unite reps have reportedly told drivers the union was legally obliged to put the offer. This is a lie. The Tories are drafting anti-strike legislation forcing unions to

bring back *all* pay offers before striking. But Unite has been ahead of the curve, agreeing to ballot on a string of shoddy offers at the say-so of the bus operators. No principled opposition can be expected from Unite to the battery of anti-strike laws being readied, including use of agency workers to break strikes (already legislated) and the outlawing of strikes on transport via the Minimum Services Act.

Metroline workers have taken an important step in rejecting the company's derisory offer brought back by Unite. But lessons must be drawn from this year's pay disputes across London, which also began with massive no votes against shoddy offers backed by overwhelming strike votes only to be worn down and betrayed by Unite.

Nothing remains of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham's claims that co-ordinated strike action would be organised across London. Graham's fan club in Unite, including "activists" James Rossi and Kevin Mustafa, had claimed Graham's reps in the "bus combine" would lead the fight for an "inflation-busting" 15 percent pay rise.

In late September, strikes at London United were ended based on a 10 percent settlement. At Arriva London North strike action was suspended and a below-inflation 11.1 percent pay deal recommended by Unite, passing on a narrow majority. At Stagecoach East London and Go Ahead further real terms pay cuts were enforced of 10 percent and 10.5 percent respectively, after bus drivers who had rejected previous derisory offers were denied a strike ballot. Each of these deals was celebrated by Graham.

Unite's actions have emboldened the operators. Abellio has not even tabled an offer, with the company's 950 drivers at the five garages in south and west London due to take ten days of strike action from November 22.

Bus drivers must regroup in opposition to Unite's divide-and-rule policy and unify their struggles in alliance with London Underground and rail workers facing the same onslaught on pay, terms and conditions.

Metroline drivers must reject the demands for "sacrifice" from the asset strippers and profiteers at ComfortDelGro. It is handing out millions to its shareholders, including from the sale of the Metroline's Alperton bus garage site in west London, which it

closed last year. Decades of wage suppression must be ended with a genuine above-inflation pay-raise, including the abolition of discriminatory pay grades. Strike dates must be coordinated with Abellio drivers, with rank-and-file delegations visiting RATP Dev, Arriva, Go Ahead, the London Underground and rail to win support from transport workers across London.



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