

Abellio London bus drivers strike for £20 an hour pay: “I’m working a 60-hour week to keep my head above water”

Our reporters

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Nearly 1,000 London bus drivers at Abellio garages in south and west London have launched strike action to win an above-inflation pay deal. They are demanding a minimum hourly rate of £20 for all drivers and improvements to break times and schedules and are opposing cuts to overtime rates.

Drivers at Battersea, Beddington, Hayes, Southall, Twickenham and Walworth garages began 10 days of strikes last Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. Hundreds have mobilised on picket lines. Further strikes are scheduled December 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 16 and 17.

Abellio drivers have rejected a revised offer from Abellio that would deliver huge cuts to pay. Senior drivers’ hourly rate would go up from £15.22 to just £17.50, while drivers with less than two years’ service would rise from £13.09 to £15.05. This would leave workers treading water and is well below the current RPI inflation rate of 14.2 percent. Living costs are predicted to rise steeply in the months ahead.

Abellio also proposed eliminating “voluntary” overtime rates and extra payments for working on rest days. Many drivers rely on overtime to cover housing costs, fuel, household energy bills and food. Even with the proposed “uplift” to the hourly rate, drivers would be substantially worse off.

Abellio is crying poor, but it took in revenue of €3.3 billion in 2021 (excluding its Merseyrail joint venture). Abellio’s UK workforce is 14,500 including thousands of rail workers currently in dispute. Eight of Abellio’s top paid UK executives receive more than £1.32 million between them, with Managing Director Alex Hynes pocketing £334,999-a-year.

On Tuesday, Unite officials will resume pay talks with Abellio and Unite officials are already

backpedalling on drivers’ demands. A video tweeted by Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham on Saturday features Guy Langston, Unite Regional Officer, declaring, “We want £19 an hour”. Drivers were quick to point out that they are demanding £20 an hour for both senior and new drivers.

Langston said of the Abellio strike, “They’ve been the lowest paid drivers in London for at least the last 12 years.” This is an indictment of Unite, which has delivered decades of wage suppression via pay deals cooked up with the operators. In the same video, an Abellio driver explains, “Our pay rises have been going smaller and smaller percentages. Now we cannot cope.”

The fight at Abellio follows strikes at London United (RATP Dev) and Arriva, and a months-long dispute at Go Ahead. Back in April, Unite promised London-wide action to win an “inflation-busting” 15 percent pay rise. But Unite officials have divided drivers, company-by-company, foisting under-inflation pay awards across London.

This strategy is being continued at Metroline, where Unite officials have steered the dispute back into the ACAS arbitration service. This followed a counteroffer by Unite of just 12 percent and 11 percent back pay! Unite has bowed to Metroline’s request that future pay negotiations proceed at ACAS, “The pay committee have taken the decision that this is something they are prepared to proceed with if it means we can reach a point in negotiations with the employer ahead of any strike action.”

Metroline and Abellio drivers need to take action to prevent their struggle being sold out. Unite officials operate as junior partners for the bus operators and

Transport for London and will be working overtime to try and cobble together a sellout deal ahead of this week's strikes.

Abellio strikers speak out

Drivers at Abellio are determined to win. A driver on the picket at Battersea garage explained on Saturday, "I am a newer driver, so I am on a lower rate, and I work over 60 hours a week to get £500 a week. It's hard, but that's the only way I can keep my head above water.

"The overtime rates are a big issue, because we rely on it to make up our pay. Under the new offer if we work on the weekend as part of our roster it's a flat rate for voluntary overtime. We have been here now for three days, and we hope this will make the company come back to us with a far better offer."

Another Battersea driver said, "We are doing more tasks than even the train drivers. When you see the traffic on the road it's like a war every day you take a bus. We need to be so alert to everything because you are taking care of the life of passengers. Unite needs to get us better pay, otherwise people will be leaving the job.

"The cost of living is affecting us. I work nearly 60 hours per week with overtime. The company knows people need to work overtime, but when you look at the net pay, it's not enough. We are also not on the same pay. If all the drivers from all the companies came together, we would be more effective. They divide us so that we are not united."

A driver from Beddington Cross garage in south Croydon explained, "What drivers want is for all drivers to be on £20 an hour. And by the looks of it they are quite willing to stand their ground. Especially when we saw what the directors have given themselves—one of them got a 46 percent pay increase and another one got a 41 percent pay increase.

"When we were outside, one of the managers and HR were saying that us asking for £20 an hour would cost them something in the region of £20 million, which is not really my problem.

"For the next three weeks I'm going to be working for 7-days until I get my long weekend, but there's

more to life than giving them every single day of your life to make them happy. All they're interested in is making the mileage.

"I don't see the drivers of Abellio backing down, and I think a lot of the other bus companies' garages are waiting to see whether they should have stuck to their ground and not accepted what they were given as well. Drivers who can't afford to pay £1,500 or £2,000 rent a month have got no choice but to work all that overtime. Fortunately, I've got a housing association property so my rent's not sky-high. If I had to pay private rent, I don't know what I'd be doing, I'd be knackered.

"Sharon Graham has helped every bus company or every transport and haulage company past the Watford Gap. I've not really seen her stoking the fire to help the London bus drivers. It's almost like they're keeping you in a pen, poking you with that hot poker, keeping you away from the fire to stop you from fanning any flames and causing a riot. People have just had enough.

"You're paying your rent and then a good majority of your pay is going on your gas and electric. Food has gone up. Even a litre of milk has gone from £1.45 to £1.89 or £1.90-something. That's just for a litre. Thank God I don't have little kids. I'd be probably destitute. I said to one of the drivers, if you're in a two-income house it's probably a little bit better, but if you're a one-income house and you're just paying the bills, you are done for. Some people will have to work rest days.

"Everyone should be on the same rate of pay, all drivers. You're all doing the same job. You all go out in the morning, you all check the bus, you're all going out to the same place, and you have to sit and listen to people moaning at you all day, sitting in the traffic, come back with the bus, sign-off. So why are we all on different pay rates?"



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