

Defeat Unite's sabotage of London bus strikes! Vote NO to sellout pay deal at Metroline!

London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
1 December 2022

Unite the union cancelled three days of strikes by London bus drivers at Metroline garages on Wednesday, provoking widespread anger. The strikes were cancelled based on a below-inflation pay deal hatched by Unite and company officials at conciliation service ACAS.

Unite's intervention is a gift to Metroline, owned by transport giant ComfortDelGro. It is outright sabotage against coordinated strikes by Metroline and Abellio drivers planned on December 1, 2 and 3. The union-company deal is being put to drivers at Metroline in a ballot Friday, while Abellio drivers are being left to fight alone.

Unite Regional Organiser Laura Johnson announced the suspension of strikes in a joint letter with Metroline CEO Sean O'Shea late Wednesday afternoon—just hours before strikes were set to begin. Their announcement, published on Unite letterhead, declared, “we are pleased that we have reached an agreement that will be recommended at all garages”.

Johnson and O'Shea informed drivers, “The headlines for this offer are an 11% increase on all rates of pay, with 10% back pay, with more details to follow.” They withheld further information, cancelling a Unite members Zoom meeting scheduled for Wednesday night.

On Thursday, details of the pay-deal were circulated in a letter sent by Metroline's CEO to Johnson. It makes clear that Unite is recommending a major attack on drivers' pay and conditions.

Metroline's revised pay offer of 11 percent, and reduced backpay of 10 percent means Unite cancelled strikes based on an overall “uplift” of just 10.25 percent—a 0.25 percent improvement on the offer drivers rejected only last month. In November, drivers voted down an offer of 9 percent backdated and 10 percent from settlement date.

Unite's deal with Metroline is a real-terms pay cut, with RPI inflation running at 14.2 percent. On top of this, Unite agreed to move the pay anniversary date forward, with drivers estimating they will lose anywhere between £600 and £1,000, depending on their grade.

Unite's deal further entrenches pay inequality, rejecting drivers' demand for the abolition of lower pay grades for doing the same job. A new grade with a measly uplift to £17.22 (Monday-Friday) is introduced for drivers in their third year of service, but only if they agree to relinquish progression to higher grade 5 rates in future years. The new grade will apply automatically to drivers at year three, “unless they submit an opt-out”, a sneaky way of phasing out grade 5.

Finally, attention should be drawn to Unite's shameful recommendation of death-in-service benefits capped at £30,000. By July 8, 2020, Metroline accounted for the majority of London bus fatalities from COVID-19—12 bus workers—nearly double that of the next highest number of deaths (7) at Go-Ahead, according to information obtained under Freedom of Information.

When bus driver David O'Sullivan blew the whistle over the spread of infections at Cricklewood garage and called for urgent safety measures to protect lives, Metroline sacked him with Unite's backing. Unite's support for a death-in-service payment capped at £30,000 amounts to a license for Metroline to continue its callous work practices in relation to COVID-19, extreme driver fatigue, and ongoing issues with vehicle maintenance and safety.

At a Unite Zoom meeting reconvened on Thursday night as a “report back” to members, Johnson did not even bother to show up. She represents an unaccountable bureaucracy that is happy to do deals at workers expense, leaving local reps and convenor Donald Palmer to face

angry members. Drivers attacked the deal and demanded to know which reps voted for it. Palmer claimed the information was “confidential”.

Unite’s self-declared “activists”, including former bus driver Kevin Mustafa and former Unite rep and convenor Stephen O’Rourke, have claimed the fault lies with local reps and the Metroline convenor, while shielding the real authors in Unite’s national leadership, above all General Secretary Sharon Graham.

After six months in which Graham has presided over below-inflation pay deals across London—at Arriva London North, Arriva London South, RATP and Go Ahead—Mustafa once again appealed to drivers yesterday to contact “Sharon” and let her know about the rotten deal—as if the general secretary is somehow in the dark over the actions of her own union in a major London transport dispute!

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee urges Metroline drivers to deliver a resounding NO in Friday’s ballot. Unite’s latest actions in pushing a pro-company deal and sabotaging joint industrial action with Abellio drivers shows that workers must take control. Join us in forming rank-and-file strike committees at every garage to draw up a plan for unified strike action and a log of claims, including for an inflation-busting pay rise and urgently needed improvements to terms and conditions to win support from transport workers across London and beyond.

Unite says Metroline “cannot afford” an above-inflation pay rise. The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee rejects all such claims. ComfortDelGro posted a 30.4 percent increase in net profit to £71.51 million for the first half of 2022. The company employs 24,000 workers worldwide and last month won new bus contracts in Australia worth A\$1.6 billion. The needs of workers who operate the transport system must take priority over corporate and shareholder profit.



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