

Unite's Sharon Graham declares below-inflation pay deal at Metroline a “victory”

Laura Tiernan
9 December 2022

A months-long dispute at Metroline, one of the largest bus companies in London, ended last Friday after Unite the union recommended a below-inflation pay deal that was narrowly accepted. Unite's actions have produced widespread anger among drivers.

The sell-out pay deal of 11 percent (and just 10 percent backpay) was recommended to drivers by Unite Regional Organiser Laura Jones and Metroline CEO Sean O'Shea in a joint statement issued on November 30 following talks at conciliation service ACAS.

Metroline drivers were scheduled to join strikes by 1,000 of their colleagues at bus company Abellio, but Unite officials unilaterally called off the strikes at Metroline with less than 12-hours' notice, with Jones and O'Shea declaring: “we are pleased that we have reached an agreement that will be recommended at all garages”.

Last Friday's snap ballot resulted in a narrow “yes” vote: 819 in favour and 774 against. Such a large “no” vote-- 48.4 percent--speaks to a groundswell of opposition by drivers to Unite's collusion with the bus operators and Transport for London.

Half of Metroline's ten garages voted to reject the deal outright. At Harrow Weald 102 drivers voted to reject (76.12 percent); at Holloway 199 drivers voted to reject (73.70 percent); at Perivale 102 drivers voted to reject (62.69 percent); at Potters Bar 93 drivers voted to reject (50.54 percent); and at Lampton 47 drivers voted to reject (77.05 percent).

The large “no” vote was a determined and courageous one, registered in the face of a major scare campaign by Unite officials.

A driver at Cricklewood, where the “yes” vote was 77.53 percent, told WSW, “Since the first proposal of 10 percent, the Unite rep at the garage was encouraging many drivers to accept the deal, claiming that inflation was lower than 10 percent, and that we could miss a chance to have a good deal if we did not vote yes. I

experienced myself such a scenario.

“There was also a letter posted to many drivers insinuating that we could be better off accepting the 10 percent deal. The letter calculated the amount of money the drivers would receive soon from backpay (brain washing), and the letter also mentioned that if we choose going for a strike, we drivers could break a good relationship with company.

“It was a sort of a letter to persuade, but at same time a diplomatic intimidation or threat. Plus, there were a lot of posts on Blink [the company App] supposedly written by drivers, encouraging that it was the best deal.”

Unite's delaying tactics—they did not even ballot for industrial action until October 10, with results announced one month later—ensured that strike action was pushed as close as possible to Christmas. With drivers facing a cost-of-living crisis, Metroline and Unite cynically used the lure of a backpay lump sum to help push through their below inflation deal.

As a result of Unite's actions at Metroline, Abellio drivers have been left to fight alone. They are continuing strikes this week against a company offer of 9.5 percent for senior drivers (£18.00 an hour) and 6.4 percent for new drivers (£14.71 an hour).

Drivers confront a union apparatus--from garage reps to Unite head office--unaccountable and hostile to their needs. At a Zoom meeting on the eve of last Friday's vote, Unite convenor Donald Palmer refused to tell drivers which of their reps had voted to recommend Metroline's below-inflation deal. Jones, who personally oversaw the deal, refused to attend the Zoom meeting.

Throughout the dispute, as drivers' anger grew toward repeated below-inflation offers brought back by the union's Negotiating Committee, Unite “activists” such as Kevin Mustafa and former Metroline convenor Stephen O'Rourke, claimed the problem lay with garage reps and convenors' caving in to company demands against the

wishes of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham. This theory--aimed at shackling workers to the bureaucracy and politically shielding Unite head office--has been blown apart by Graham and her senior officials.

On Wednesday, she issued a statement declaring, "This is a significant victory for our members at Metroline who by standing together and being prepared to take industrial action have secured a greatly improved pay offer."

Graham's trumpeting a "greatly improved" pay deal provoked an angry response from Metroline drivers. Joao replied that Graham's "victory" was a disaster for workers, condemning Unite's underhand tactics in securing acceptance of the deal, "PAY CUT + moving of the anniversary date. Very dodgy how deal is done on Thursday and brought to the member[s] next day on a Friday no discussion possible between reps or colleagues. Unite Recommended. Cheers for the lost."

Zakaria Sidani replied to Graham, "Have some dignity before you call that a victory. Shame on you & consider your position."

Akhtar Miah wrote, "Absolutely disgrace from the unite throwing these members under the bus and saying this is a victory... Shame on you and your well out team."

Mark Stanford replied, "OMG! How can you class a PAY CUT as a victory. Those involved in bringing this deal back to drivers should hang their heads in shame."

The below-inflation deal at Metroline will doubtless be added to the list of 400+ disputes which Graham has shamelessly claimed as "victories" since she became general secretary.

In a press release from Unite issued Wednesday, Graham claimed, "This pay deal exemplifies how Unite's commitment to always prioritise the jobs, pay and conditions of its members is delivering noteworthy financial dividends." No, it doesn't. The only "financial dividends" being delivered by Unite are to the company.

Throughout 2022, as inflation has skyrocketed, Unite has divided drivers across London on a company-by-company basis, suppressing demands for united action, including with tube and rail workers who returned overwhelming strike votes since late last year.

A major propaganda campaign was launched by the trade union bureaucracy, and its political accomplices in the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, to promote Graham as a militant "new broom" who was transforming Unite into a "member-led" organisation. The SWP claimed her election was a "boost for the left", while the SP insisted her victory was a "new opportunity to resist bosses and Tories offensive and

challenge Starmer's New Labour".

These efforts to promote Graham as a "militant" served to politically disarm the working class and encouraged illusions the union could be pressured to fight. Far from challenging the Tories, Graham has blocked any effective challenge to the dictates of the bus operators, or to Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan who is working with the Tory government to slash billions of pounds from London transport.

Unite's collusion with the bus operators is determined by its defence of the capitalist profit system. Graham and her fellow bureaucrats in the leadership of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, Communication Workers Union, GMB and Unison represent a privileged apparatus which works directly with the corporations, government and the state to police and suppress the class struggle.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee has consistently advanced a strategy for bus and transport workers to fight back. The committee warned that no faith could be placed in Graham or her reps in Unite's "bus combine" who had promised they would organise London-wide strikes to win a 15 percent "inflation-busting" pay rise for drivers. It published statements and held a series of online meetings throughout the year to expose Unite's role and fight for an alternative.

Rank-and-file committees formed at every garage would break the grip of Unite's pro-company apparatus and place control in the hands of bus workers. Such committees can overcome the divisions fostered by Unite, drawing bus and transport workers together across London and placing the needs of workers and passengers over corporate and shareholder profit. They would win support among workers entering struggle across the UK, Europe and worldwide.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact