

Abellio London bus drivers strike against below inflation pay award

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Abellio bus drivers in London are continuing their fight for an above inflation pay increase and improvements to break times, recovery periods between shifts and overtime rates.

Strike action began November 22, with 10 days of rolling strikes up to December 17 by around 1,000 members of Unite at six garages in South and West London—Battersea, Beddington, Hayes, Southall, Twickenham and Walworth garages.

A further round of 11 days of strikes were announced across the Christmas and New Year period, with stoppages on December 24, 27, 31 and January 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 19, 25 and 26.

There have been mass turnouts on the picket, with drivers in a buoyant and determined mood. They explained to the WSWS they were no longer prepared to compensate for low pay by working up to 60 hours a week with overtime, or to accept punishing schedules depriving them of any work-life balance.

Abellio is pleading poverty after it made €401 million profit in 2021 with Managing Director Alex Hynes pocketing nearly £335,000 a year. Abellio's UK workforce is around 14,500 including its rail concessions, West Midland Trains, East Midland Railway and Greater Anglia, which have been at the centre of the national rail strikes against an extended pay freeze and restructuring of terms and conditions.

A unified counteroffensive across the transport network has been prevented by Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union. The RMT hailed a 7 percent pay rise at Merseyrail in June, which Abellio runs as a joint venture with Serco. Unite has taken separate action at Abellio East Midlands by around 140 members, including technicians, shunters, engineers and cleaners at depots in Derby, Leicester and Nottingham. They have taken eight days of strike

action since October with a two-day stoppage on December 23/24 as the company refuses to make any offer.

Abellio refused to begin negotiations for the London bus drivers pay award until November and has only come back with sub-standard offers since. The company announced it will impose its final offer by December 31. A pay award of 12 percent is for newer drivers and covers a period of up to two years, bringing their basic hourly rate from £13.09 to just £14.71. Only drivers of two years plus would receive an increase of 18 percent from £15.22 to £18.00 on the basic hourly rate, increasing the gap between the two-tiers by £3.29. None of these increases are passed on for weekend working, voluntary or involuntary overtime and rest day working rates—all whittled down to single percentage points.

Abellio's bullying to impose the deal includes offering a £500 bonus for any driver prepared to scab on the strike.

The company relies on Unite to betray the dispute. Unite back peddled over the original demand for parity and a £20 hourly rate for all drivers, revising the claim to £18.50 for senior drivers and the lower rate for newer drivers of £15.05. The struggle at Abellio would have been joined by 2,000 Metroline bus drivers at 10 garages across west and north London from December 1 for three days in the first round of seven days of stoppages. This would have been the first combined strike action at two separate companies by bus workers in London among the 20,000 workforce. But Unite called off the Metroline action, issuing a joint statement with the company to recommend the below inflation agreement of 11 percent (and just 10 percent backpay). Half of the garages and 48.4 percent of drivers voted to throw out the deal, which was backed by the Unite

bureaucracy all the way up to General Secretary Sharon Graham.

Graham took to Twitter to announce the latest sub-standard agreement as a “significant victory”, which was directly challenged by Metroline drivers leaving comments denouncing a “pay cut” bringing “shame” and a “disgrace.”

Graham appeared on the Abellio picket line at Battersea December 16, with Abellio having already sent out its letter informing drivers that the de facto pay cut was to be imposed. While claiming that Abellio drivers had the full backing of Unite there was no question of a broader mobilisation against Abellio. Instead, Unite announced a doubling of strike pay from £70 to £140 a day. This only applies to the last three days in December, not the further eight days of action into January. It is to buy time to try and wear down resistance, claiming that Abellio drivers could take the below inflation award while continuing to strike in isolation.

Graham claimed to bring solidarity from “531 picket lines” of “over 100,000 members.” But the Unite bureaucracy over the last month has pushed through a number of sub inflation deals, including suspending industrial action by National Health Service workers in Scotland for an average 7.5 percent and ending strike action by control room workers at Network Rail for a 9 percent two-year deal. In the run up to Christmas the union called off action by ground handlers employed by Menzies at Heathrow airport, with Graham celebrating a 9.5 percent pay deal with a further 1 percent in January.

She offered as an “escalation” of the Abellio dispute her “leverage” strategy of appeals to the corporate boardroom, including current owners the state-run Dutch railways (Nederlandse Spoorwegen) and UK management who are in the process of a UK buy out.

This leverage strategy was used to end the 11 week strike by 400 bus drivers in Manchester at Go North West in 2021 against fire and rehire. It was used to get the union back around the table with the company in return for a rotten sellout agreeing to over £1 million cuts at the expense of jobs terms and conditions.

David O’Sullivan attended the picket line at Battersea on December 17 bringing solidarity from the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee who were committed to the £20 hour demand and supported

unified action. He explained how this could only be developed by bus workers taking the fight out of the hands of the union apparatus and drawing up an agenda to enforce workers’ demands on pay and conditions against the private operators and their shareholders.

A Battersea driver explained, “I’m here for the unity of all bus drivers for better pay. The company offer does not reflect what we are entitled to just to keep up with inflation. You can barely afford to heat your home. It should be £20 per hour from the first year and for overtime and weekends £25 an hour.

“I don’t think it’s fair that Metroline drivers are not out with us. I’ve only just heard about this today. I support all the strikes including the nurses. The pandemic showed how they did not get the proper conditions and a lot of them died, which happened with us in the bus industry. We all deserve better pay.”

A striking Abellio worker at another garage in south London told the WSWS, “Bus drivers should all be paid the same rate. We all have to get up at the same ungodly hour and work to an ungodly hour, putting up with the same problems and facing the same cost of living crisis. The pandemic showed how important the job is, getting nurses to hospital and keeping other key workers moving. We’ve been the bottom of the pecking order for too long, which we are not going to accept. We know Abellio made profits of more than £400 million last year.

“Sharon Graham has been selling bus workers down the river and has only showed up at the last minute, thinking we are going to give up. But it’s the drivers keeping this dispute going. The union has been divisive. There has been no plan to bring us together in the same fight, to bring the bus companies to their knees.”



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