

Break Unite's isolation of the Abellio London bus dispute!

London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
18 January 2023

Nearly 2,000 bus drivers at six garages in south and west London run by Abellio are entering their third month of strikes over pay. They are demanding £20 an hour for all drivers, along with improved overtime rates and an end to punishing work schedules.

Thursday's one-day strike will mark the nineteenth day of action, which has impacted 60 bus routes in the capital. After decades of wage suppression, enforced by Unite the union, Abellio drivers are determined to win an above-inflation pay award. The strike action is to continue January 25 and 26, with a three-day strike scheduled for the first week of February.

Bus drivers remain defiant after the company imposed a pay award on December 31. This represented a below inflation deal of around 12 percent for new starters (up to 2 years' service), with wages increasing from £13.09 to just £14.71 an hour. For senior drivers the hourly rate increase was from £15.22 to £18.00, worth approximately 18 percent. However, this relates only to the flat rate for Monday to Friday with the percentage increases not passed on for weekend work, overtime and rest-day working. These are all below the rate of inflation.

After unilaterally implementing the pay award, Abellio offered a £500 bonus to drivers to break the strike. The company then offered an insulting increase in the hourly rate for new drivers to £15.05 in another bid to undermine industrial action.

In the ballot held last Friday at the Battersea, Beddington, Southall, Twickenham, Walworth and Hayes garages, drivers cast 1,137 votes against the offer, with just 126 voting in favour.

Abellio also promised a "full review of the 2018 Schedules Agreement" by a "working group" of company and Unite officials, with new schedules to be agreed and implemented "from January 2024". Drivers were correctly suspicious of this proposal. The 2018 agreement was co-authored by Unite.

Abellio Managing Director Jon Eardley issued a letter ahead of the ballot warning drivers that the revised offer had "exceeded our affordability". His threat that "only an immediate resolution to this dispute will prevent significant long-lasting damage being done to this company, putting depots, routes and jobs at risk" was rejected.

Following the vote, Eardley wrote to drivers again, declaring, "We are deeply disappointed that following constructive discussions with Unite on Thursday, the offer made to members was not accepted through yesterday's ballot." Eardley's attack on drivers for rejecting the company's "constructive" deal with Unite speaks volumes. It shows the extent of collusion between the bus companies and Unite, whose officials pointedly refused to call for a "no" vote.

Socialist Workers Party: PR agency for union bureaucrats

The strike at Abellio is the longest running in a series of pay disputes fought by London bus drivers in 2022. At Arriva, RATP and Metroline, thousands of bus workers voted for industrial action to fight low pay and rampant exploitation. But Unite opposed drivers' demands for London-wide action, enforcing below-inflation pay deals across London: 3.5 percent at Arriva London South; 11 percent at Arriva London North; 9.25 percent at London United (RATP); 10.25 percent at Metroline.

Abellio's was the last remaining pay dispute for 2022. With inflation hitting a 40-year high, workers were in no mood to compromise. Having presided over a long list of rotten deals against drivers, General Secretary Sharon Graham and other lead officials seized on the Abellio

dispute to try to revive Unite's tattered reputation. The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has rushed forward to assist these efforts.

On December 16, Graham appeared at an Abellio picket, assuring drivers they had the full backing of Unite. But since December 20 the union has not provided any updates on its national web site, burying the dispute.

On January 13, the SWP published an article in *Socialist Worker* headlined, "Abellio strike shows the route to bus win". It offers cringeworthy praise for Unite, concealing its isolation of the Abellio strike and the union's broader record of enforcing wage and strike suppression during a summer and winter of discontent that has threatened repeatedly to erupt into a general strike.

Author Sam Ord begins by falsely identifying Unite with the fight for £20 an hour. In reality, Unite senior officials led by Guy Langston offered to settle the strike based on a counter-offer to Abellio last month of £18.50 for senior drivers and £15.05 for new starters.

Ord makes a dishonest attempt to associate Unite with the defeat of last week's below-inflation pay offer, writing in reverential tones, "There was pride and delight in the voice of the Unite union rep," as he announced the result of last Friday's ballot. Ord maintains a diplomatic silence on Unite's collusion with Abellio, including its accepting negotiations on a new scheduling agreement whose terms would remain unknown to drivers. Skating over this sellout, he offers the lame apologia that "The union did not recommend how to vote, although some reps most certainly did speak to the members and pushed rejection."

The SWP claims, "Backing from other workers has been central to maintaining the strike" and cites a Unite rep who says that "Other unions—Usdaw, Unison and more—have visited us." Ord continues, "Drivers beep their horns and cheer from the window as they pass the picket lines, as do paramedics in ambulances and Go Ahead bus drivers who operate similar routes."

The reference to Go Ahead is particularly galling. Pay disputes at both companies overlapped in 2022, with Unite ensuring that drivers across the two largest bus companies remained divided. Consequently, drivers at Go Ahead can only toot in support, having been denied a strike ballot. They had rejected a 9 percent pay offer but Unite ensured a ballot for industrial action was not held and then worked to push acceptance of the revised below-inflation deal of 10.5 percent.

Ord's article is a whitewash. He writes, "During national rail strikes, the tactic of the RMT leaders has

been to stop and start strikes, as well as calling them off at a moment's notice." Yet the same tactics have been employed by Unite across the London bus network, with intermittent strikes unilaterally cancelled to bulldoze through sub-inflation pay deals.

Abellio drivers cannot win their fight alone. In his letter last week, Eardley sought to justify the company's 12.9 percent pay offer with reference to the below-inflation pay awards as being "substantially more than is offered elsewhere, such as the railway, postal workers and healthcare."

A coordinated political and industrial offensive must be organized uniting bus drivers across London and linking up with tens of thousands of rail, London Underground and other key workers in the UK and across Europe who are entering into struggle. Rank-and-file committees must be formed at every workplace to take forward this fight, and a new mass socialist party must be constructed.

This month's Oxfam report on global social inequality proves that wage suppression and the cost-of-living crisis is a global phenomenon rooted in capitalism and the dictatorship of a financial and corporate oligarchy, backed by the state. This is the system upheld by the trade union bureaucracy, whose officials serve as industrial policemen, suppressing the growing rebellion in the working class in defence of their own corporatist alliance with big business and the state.

While Abellio is working with Unite to try and cobble together a sellout agreement against drivers, the company is also working behind the scenes to break the strike. It has stepped up efforts to recruit agency drivers, offering a £2,000 sign-on bonus, doubtless banking on the support of the Tory government's new draconian Minimum Service Level anti-strike legislation.



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