

Abellio strike at a crossroads: Defeat Unite's sabotage of London bus pay fight!

London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
29 January 2023

The Unite union's recommendation of a sell-out pay deal at Abellio London shows that bus drivers must take direct control of the dispute and call for support from bus and transport workers across the capital. This is the only way to prevent their determined fight from being defeated by union bureaucrats colluding with the bus operators and Transport for London (TfL).

A below-inflation pay deal was recommended by Unite last Wednesday after talks with Abellio. Unite officials Bobby Morton (National Officer, Passenger Transport), Guy Langston (Regional Officer), Onay Kasab (National Lead Officer) and the Abellio London and West London Shop Stewards Committee issued a signed statement announcing, "Our view is that this is the best agreement that can be negotiated without further significant and prolonged periods of industrial action."

Morton and his fellow bureaucrats claimed their deal resolved drivers' demands over "basic rates, weekend working, TUPE drivers and scheduling". But it was an insult to members, raising weekend basic rates by just 30 pence an hour, and then only for limited categories, leaving drivers with below-inflation pay amid the deepest cost-of-living crisis in decades.

In a separate notice Unite officials declared, "we have reached a negotiated position we believe is acceptable to you the membership." But the deal once again left the issue of drivers' schedules unresolved and to be decided by a joint "working group" of handpicked company and Unite officials

Unite used the below-inflation offer to cancel strikes, "from first bus tomorrow morning", ending their statement with a cynical and ingratiating declaration, "The fact that we have got to this point is absolutely down to your resolve and strength."

Unite ensured the ballot was worded in such a way as

to commit drivers to further prolonged strikes if they voted against. But drivers were neither fooled, nor intimidated. The company-union deal was rejected by 786 to 373 in the overall vote in Thursday's ballot with 4 of the 6 garages voting against by large margins : Battersea (234 to 22); Beddington (193 to 54); Hayes (88 to 12); and Southall (121 to 67). The votes in favour were narrower at Walworth (116 to 78) and Twickenham (102 to 72).

The strikes at Abellio have entered their third month and enjoy the support of bus drivers across London who see it as the focus of a wider fightback. Action is set to resume this week, with a three-day strike on February 1, 2 and 3. But anger is running high over Unite's attempts to sabotage the fight.

On Saturday, Abellio drivers spoke to members of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and the Socialist Equality Party, who visited Battersea garage. One said, "Bobby Morton came in and cut a deal before they even went to the table. One of the reps said he was in the meeting, and he realised the deal was already reached beforehand. He was forced to sign even though he did not want to. A lot of other reps were in the same situation."

Morton was promoted by Unite activists during last year's pay strikes at Arriva, RATP, Go-Ahead and Metroline. He was described as union leader "Sharon Graham's general" who would lead the fight for an "inflation-busting pay rise". Instead, he oversaw a strategy of divide-and-conquer, imposing below-inflation pay deals across London.

Onay Kasab is another Unite official sent in by Graham to suppress driver militancy. A leading member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, Kasab was a key signatory to last Wednesday's sell-out deal. Socialist Party supporters such as Joanne Harris have

been active on social media defending the deal against angry drivers.

Last Friday's ballot was the second in a fortnight organised by Unite to push a below-inflation pay deal. On January 13, a similar deal was rejected overwhelmingly by drivers, 1,137 votes to just 126 in favour.

A driver with 17 years on the job told WSWS why he rejected the latest offer: "On one of the strike days, a guy came with a pay slip from 2012. And for those five days he was taking home £490. We are basically still on that. I went back and looked for my old pay slip as well. It was £450 pounds in 2013."

When he first saw Unite's call to accept Abellio's offer, he expected a good deal. "Half an hour later I saw it was just a 30 pence increase for weekend rate only. It wasn't across the board. It was just Saturday, Sunday, the unsociable hours, nothing else was sorted. What is this they're saying to accept?"

"Then the feedback starts, the drivers were cursing left, right, and centre. We have a WhatsApp group as well. It was just message after message. We will strike [this week], but it's not good enough, and that's making a lot of the drivers go back."

Another driver who stopped was also furious over the deal put to drivers. "Who is winning? Transport for London is winning. The union is in collusion with the company. Why would you agree to something and then come back and tell us to go back to strike. You go and you agree 30 pence? You shouldn't even come back to us with it.

"It shows that you don't value us as a team of people. Who are you supposed to be out there representing? So why would you bring that back to ballot? The company can't tell you what to say to members. You should say to them, 'Under no circumstance am I going back with an agreement with 30p', because 30 pence—you can't even buy a bottle of water. What difference does it make?"

"We have to work together with people who are going to stand for all of our rights and justice. This is not about the colour of the shirt or the colour of the skin, it's about principle and the fundamental rights of humanity when it comes to work. And if you don't have that, there's no point. And if the people in this country want to have their own destiny, then the people will fight.

"People are not involved in shaping their own destiny. They're not, and because they're not, this is where the problem is, because we are always depending on somebody else to do it for us. Do it yourself!"

"We've got to unite together and realise there's more poor people than rich people, who create the wealth. We are the foundation of everything."

To defeat Unite's collusion with the bus operators and TfL, rank-and-file committees must be formed at every garage to link up bus and transport workers across London to win an inflation-busting pay rise and end the crushing burden of forced overtime to make ends meet.

The fight of London bus drivers is a political struggle against a Conservative government preparing to impose anti-strike laws and a Labour Party opposition that is rehearsing for government based on a programme of austerity, budget cuts and militarism. We urge bus workers to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and help prepare an urgently needed fightback.



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