

London bus drivers urge united action as Unite tries to close down Abellio strike

Our correspondents
31 January 2023

London bus drivers have voiced solidarity with their colleagues at Abellio who are in the third month of strikes demanding £20 an hour for all drivers and an end to punishing work schedules.

Drivers from Go-Ahead and Metroline bus companies told the *World Socialist Web Site* that strikes at Abellio should be expanded across London. They condemned Unite bureaucrats for enforcing under-inflation pay deals across the capital in 2022.

The drivers spoke in response to the statement by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, “Abellio strike at crossroads: Defeat Unite’s sabotage of London bus pay fight” which stated:

“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 Go-Ahead bus driver in north London said, “Abellio drivers were right to throw out that deal. It was rubbish on pay and nothing was resolved over scheduling.

“We got 10 percent last year. This in no way matched the cost of living.

“The company has now cut down on running time and standing time. Where you had five minutes standing at each end it is now three with three minutes cut from running time. This is causing accidents. You imagine how much they have saved with nine minutes off a duty and there are 600-700 drivers at the garage.

“The union from the reps to convenor are in the pockets of the company. Things have gone nowhere under [Unite leader] Sharon Graham. The negotiations aren’t serious—the company start by making a low offer

and then revise it for the union to bring it back and sell it as an improvement.”

Drivers spoke out as Unite officials stepped up efforts to end the Abellio strike, due to resume February 1 for three days. Today, Unite sent out a “survey” which it described as an “Abellio consultative ballot,” asking drivers to vote again on the pay deal they already rejected last week.

Unite’s survey asked workers to choose between two options:

“I accept the employer’s last proposal” and “I do not accept the proposal and I agree to take part in further, prolonged and more sustained strike action.”

It included as an attachment Abellio’s below inflation pay offer of January 25.

In a note to members accompanying the survey, Unite emphasised that, “We want to win more, but we are very clear that significant concessions have been won already.”

Abellio’s deal with Unite was so bad that it was overwhelmingly rejected last week by 786 votes to 373.

In the face of rising anger, Unite official Guy Langston even messaged drivers claiming that Unite hadn’t recommended the deal! “The only agreement your reps came to with Abellio was to put the offer to its membership,” he wrote.

Langston was one of three officials who personally signed the recommendation to accept.

The Go-Ahead driver told WSWs his colleagues at Abellio are now on the receiving end of similar underhand tactics meted out to Go-Ahead drivers by Unite last year.

He said, “We rejected the 9 percent but never got a strike ballot and the union came back with 10 percent. They knew drivers are desperate by the end of the year and used the back pay to get it through.

“If you speak up, you will be penalised by both the company and union.

“We do need to come together. Workers do not realise the strength they have. Nothing moves without us, there would be no bus industry.”

“I have not seen anything from the union about the government’s new laws against strikes. It would be like a prison, forced labour.

“They work with the companies and they run the union like a business. And the companies just run the service like a business for profits.”

A Metroline driver from north-west London said, “Abellio drivers are absolutely right to stand up for their rights. I’ve seen what they were offered, the senior driver rates are still below what we get at Metroline for weekends and they have been fighting not to be the lowest paid in London.

“Abellio and RATP are putting in lower offers to win routes. It is the conditions of drivers which are being undercut, going back to privatisation, and it will continue as long as tendering continues because it is all about profit.

“In the pandemic we were described as key workers but as soon as we fight for improvements to our pay and terms of employment we are rounded on for being ‘greedy,’ but we are the ones who make all the wealth.

“Nothing will be won without standing up to these corporations. We have done it in the past; we have to fight to make life affordable, to live longer and with respect. It is not just the buses. All the workers are feeling the squeeze, nurses, ambulance drivers, firefighters.

“The union recommending the deal at Abellio which drivers rejected show they are in the pockets of the operating companies and directors. It has been going on for many years, for too long.

“Metroline drivers would have been out along with Abellio drivers over pay. I would have been prepared to come out and voted against the deal agreed between Unite and Metroline. It was nowhere near what we need with the cost of living. ComfortDelGro [Metroline’s parent company] is hugely profitable and they want to keep workers down.

“It is not just here in this country, it’s all over the world. The ruling classes want to keep us divided but we have to come together.

“The entire system is corrupt. It’s like the Victorian

days with the rich getting richer while the poor died of TB or cholera. We have seen this with the pandemic. It is not over, they are just ignoring it. I’ve had COVID twice and have been vaccinated.

“With this new anti-strike legislation they are trying to bring us down entirely and it will backfire. We should be out in a general strike over this.”

Unite’s actions at Abellio expose the worthless claims made by Unite’s self-styled “activists” that General Secretary Sharon Graham was a clean broom that would bring accountability to members. Graham and her cronies have spent the past 12 months preventing a unified struggle by 20,000 bus workers across the capital.

The unions’ actions left a string of below-inflation pay awards, falsely presented as “victories” by Graham, with walkouts isolated or prevented outright.

At Metroline, strike action in December by over 1,500 bus drivers at 10 garages—which would have taken place alongside strikes at Abellio—was suspended at the last moment by Unite. A below-inflation deal recommended by the union of 11 percent (10 backdated) was narrowly accepted by just over 51 percent, with drivers taking to social media and confronting Graham on her Twitter page for promoting a deal they described as shameful.

At Go-Ahead, which employs 8,000 bus workers across London, drivers rejected 9 percent, but Unite stalled a strike ballot and instead brought back a below-inflation 10.5 percent in October which it pushed through.

Unite’s efforts at betraying the fight at Abellio must be overturned. Bus workers who want to organise a rank-and-file fight back are urged to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact