

Abellio London bus drivers resume strike, defying Unite's attempted sell-out

London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
2 February 2023

Nearly 2,000 Abellio bus drivers in London resumed strike action this week. They are defying ongoing efforts by the Unite union to push a below-inflation pay deal that was overwhelmingly rejected by drivers in a ballot last week.

Drivers returned to picket lines early Wednesday for three days of continuous strikes—the longest action since November 22 when rolling strikes began.

They are escalating industrial action in the face of company threats, and efforts by Unite officials to push through their sellout pay-deal with Abellio via a “consultative ballot”—which is being dressed up as a survey.

“It’s a war now,” a senior driver from Battersea told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The union and the company thought the deal would get accepted. They were so surprised it was rejected.

“Everyone is mad. The drivers are saying the union is a sellout. Even the managers are saying they’ve never seen the drivers fighting against the company so hard, and against the union as well.”

Abellio drivers are facing a war on two fronts. Bus drivers must expand the strike London-wide and defeat Unite’s attempt to isolate and sabotage their fight.

On Tuesday, after drivers rejected the company pay deal recommended by Unite officials, Abellio announced the ongoing strikes meant they would “start making cost savings immediately to sustain the business.”

From February 4, “rest day working will be removed for all drivers. This means no driver will be able to work a rest day, whether on core service, rail replacement service, or relief roles. This will remain in place until such time that industrial action is over.”

The removal of rest day working—the best-paid overtime used by Abellio drivers to make up for the

pittance in strike pay they receive from Unite—is an attempt to break the strike and has provoked fury among drivers, with the largest ever turnout on picket lines Wednesday.

Abellio also announced the cancellation of union dues deduction as part of its payroll procedures. They are determined to hold the line against strikers’ demands.

Abellio is above all relying on the efforts of Unite to push through last week’s pay deal via the back door. This is the meaning of Unite’s “survey” sent to drivers on Tuesday. Drivers are being told to vote in what Unite also deem to be a “consultative ballot”, on the same deal which they rejected last Thursday!

The extent of the collusion between Unite and Abellio was shown Wednesday with the company issuing an “Instruction” to drivers via iBUS screens in their cabins: “Unite Recommended as Best Offer — Vote Now.”

At a Unite members meeting Tuesday night, drivers repeatedly confronted Regional Officer Guy Langston and chairperson Matthew Dore-Weeks over the union’s recommendation of a below inflation deal and their attempts to impose it again via a “consultative” ballot.

Drivers who support the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee said their democratic rights were trampled on. At least 200 drivers were excluded from the meeting, reportedly due to an administrative error, with the Zoom limited to just 100 attendees. The problem was not rectified by the simple measure of sending out a new link.

Unite reps from the garages said drivers were up in arms, angry and confused over Unite’s collusion with the company. One garage rep attacked Unite for “giving us the scraps and bringing it back to our members, it’s just draining them, exhausting them, to

keep balloting”.

The officials were also attacked for junking drivers’ demands for £20 an hour: “We keep dropping down and down. And it’s basically just draining our members and we seem like we’re lying to them.”

He continued, “Let’s be ruthless, because it’s just going to get to the stage where our members are going to say enough is enough. Either they’re going to leave the union and start going elsewhere or just go back to work.”

Throughout the meeting Dore-Weeks repeatedly interrupted drivers, chastising them for criticising Unite’s senior officials. But drivers stood their ground and reprimanded the chair for trying to silence debate.

Drivers slammed Unite for recommending the deal, and challenged Langston’s absurd claim that he did not support it—Langston signed the recommendation notice alongside Unite national officials Bobby Morton and Onay Kasab.

Langston flip-flopped like a caught fish. At one point he even stated, “I don’t think it’s a good deal, if I’m honest.”

A driver asked Langston, “Have you read the article on the *World Socialist Web Site*, ‘Abellio strike at a crossroads: Defeat Unite’s sabotage of London bus pay fight’”

Langston confirmed he had read the statement by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and responded with a political tirade against the WSWS, “They are renowned for attacking officers 24/7, every strike action that goes on they will have a say. To be honest I ignore them, same as every other officer. It’s a load of left-wing nonsense.”

When the same driver asked how the WSWS had obtained a copy of the recommendation signed by himself and the two national officers to accept the deal, she was attacked by the chair for being “really offensive”.

Called to order by those in attendance, the chair claimed he was not trying to silence debate, before again attacking them for mentioning the WSWS, which he called the “socialist world rag” whose “really offensive” comments included saying that Unite “has sold out workers”.

He continued, “The World Socialist Forum [sic] are just a bunch of shit-stirrers who don’t care about you guys. What they are writing isn’t true. We shouldn’t be

listening to them, alright? None of what they’re saying is true, alright? What they’re doing is just as bad as management. Whenever we go on strike they always criticise. They just sit there and criticise while we go out there and do the work.”

In reality, it is Unite bureaucrats who are working with management to push a below-inflation pay deal they are incapable of refuting honestly. The hostility to socialism or anything “left wing” is bound up with their policing of opposition based on what the company claims is affordable rather than putting workers interests first.

Members of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee are not simply criticising from the sidelines. They are fighting at garages to expand the strike and encouraging the formation of rank-and-file committees to coordinate a genuine fightback.

Unite’s intimidation tactics and suppression of democracy shows in practice that workers need to take matters into their own hands.

Those opposing the sell-out have raised the need to reinstate the demand for £20 an hour across the board, and no deal without an agreement to end the punishing work schedules. In opposition to the push back by the union bureaucrats and closed door meetings with management, a rank-and-file committee would make a direct appeal to bus drivers beyond Abellio and find widespread support.

The growing intransigence of bus workers reflects a broader resurgence of the class struggle across Europe and internationally. It is the working class which must set the agenda, which requires the building of a new socialist leadership in the working class.

We urge Abellio strikers and bus and transport workers across London to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and share your views.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact