

UK: Unite cancels London bus strikes at Abellio to enter talks

Our reporters
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Unite's announcement Friday cancelling two days of strikes to enter talks with Abellio confirms that the union bureaucracy is working with management to break bus drivers' determined fight for an above-inflation pay award and improvements to punishing work schedules.

On Friday, after three days of strikes by nearly 2,000 drivers in London, Unite Regional Officer Guy Langston announced the "suspension" of strikes on Monday and Tuesday of this week.

The democratic rights of Unite members were trampled on, with Langston declaring, "The decision to suspend was taken by the reps at each garage with 4 agreeing and two disagreeing."

Garage reps at Battersea, Walworth, Beddington and Southall voted to accept the suspension of strikes, while those at Twickenham and Hayes voted against. Unite members were given no say on the matter. At an online meeting on Tuesday, drivers were assured that the strike action would be going ahead.

"This is a suspension, not a withdrawal of action in order for discussion with Abellio that will take place on Tues 7th February," Langston claimed. But no amount of window dressing can disguise Unite's attempt to break three months of rolling strikes based on a sellout pay-deal with company executives.

On Saturday, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee visited Beddington and Walworth garages, encountering anger over the Unite's unilateral suspension of strikes. It is the second time in less than a fortnight that Unite has called off action.

On January 25, Unite cancelled strikes to put a company-union pay deal that was rejected resoundingly by drivers in a ballot the next day. The deal pegged wages below inflation, cut overtime payments and left schedules to be decided by a handpicked "working

party" of Abellio and Unite officials.

A driver from Beddington told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Saturday, "All we've been told is 'go back to work on Monday and Tuesday'. Well, they did the same thing the other Thursday. I got a text sent at 7 o'clock in the evening saying 'go back to work tomorrow. The strike's been suspended'. Many didn't find out until 9 o'clock."

Another driver told WSWs, "I'm a bit fed up now. I think the strike should still go on, and they called it off!"

He attacked the union-company pay deal which included an insulting 30 pence increase for weekend working, "That was proper rubbish. That's why we had to vote against it, because they [Unite officials] didn't. I was thinking, after standing here on the picket for so long: '30p! Rubbish!' They're going to have some talks, but we should still be there [on strike] until the talks are finished."

Unite is acting ruthlessly to end the dispute on the company's terms. Its lead officials joined with Abellio last week to demand drivers vote again on the pay deal they had already rejected days earlier. Framed as a "survey", Unite's "consultative ballot" was aimed at wearing down resistance.

Unite's latest strike suspension followed three days of action that threw the company into panic. On January 31, Abellio Managing Director Jon Eardley issued a letter to drivers declaring, "There will be no further meetings. There will be no further offers."

Eardley called on drivers to participate in Unite's ballot, threatening, "This ballot is your last chance to end this dispute with the offer that is on the table, before it is gone."

A follow-up notice from Abellio's Lorna Murphy advised, "If you haven't received your electronic ballot

link, please approach your manager who can help.”

Unite’s naked collusion with the company provoked outrage among drivers, with Unite lead officer Onay Kasab, a leading member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, offering the ludicrous disclaimer that, “our exercise is ours — it is not a joint exercise.”

Unite’s pro-company actions had the desired effect. Murphy crowed, “Today, we are running 53 percent of our services across the depots. Walworth and Twickenham are running in excess of 60 percent.”

Abellio had decreed the cancellation of overtime for all drivers working on rest days, a measure aimed at starving them back to work. But Unite’s officials are playing the central role as company enablers, spreading confusion and wearing down opposition to prepare the ground for a sellout. Langston admitted that drivers have reported not receiving strike pay, but he was dismissive of this stating that other striking workers on the rail and in the national health service receive none.

Another driver at Beddington told WSWS, “Now morale is low, and people are dwindling. It’s going to be very difficult, and I don’t understand; it’s not rocket science.

“We have done so well for six weeks, and we really made a mess of them [Abellio] these three days. And then they suspended the strike just to talk. You can talk on Zoom, can’t you?

“Also, I don’t like the decisions that they make, without the drivers. I mean they put us out to fight. We’re all geared up and ready to do it. And then they called it off and suspended it the other day. They said ‘next day you have to go to work’”.

A rank-and-file rebellion is now the only way to defeat a rotten sellout by Unite’s unaccountable bureaucracy. Drivers should convene rank-and-file strike committees to take control of the dispute and formulate a strategy to win.

- Remove Unite’s negotiating team of officials and reps who recommended acceptance of the January 25 sellout pay deal.
- Elect trusted workers as negotiators, answerable to the rank-and-file. All talks to be live-streamed.
- Draw up demands for a genuine above-inflation pay award, including a minimum £20 an hour for all drivers, with the same percentage increase across all overtime rates.
- Scheduling rules determined by drivers, providing

adequate break times, rest days and comfortable canteen and toilet facilities.

- Abolish the bureaucracy and increase strike pay to £100 a day. Unite’s assets must be controlled by dues-paying members.
- Appeal to agency staff to join the strike. Demand their employment by Abellio on equal pay rates and benefits as all other drivers.

Abellio drivers are facing the same cost-of-living crisis as millions of working people across Europe and worldwide. Rampant profiteering and the war in Ukraine have pushed up energy and food prices. The capitalist oligarchy is relying on the union bureaucracy to enforce wage suppression and police the class struggle while NATO escalates war against Russia and steps up provocations against China that threatens to spiral into World War III.

Even now, with millions of workers demanding strike action to defeat the Tory government’s anti-strike laws, the unions are suppressing calls for a general strike, insisting that workers put their faith in a pro-business, pro-war Labour government led by Sir Keir Starmer.

A new leadership must be built in the working class, to unify its struggles in the fight for socialism.



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