

Abellio London bus drivers challenge Unite's online "survey" used to end strikes

Our reporters
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Unite the union called off a 12-week strike on Friday to impose a below-inflation pay deal that was overwhelmingly rejected by bus drivers for Abellio in a ballot on January 26. The union-company agreement leaves key demands on pay, schedules and workloads unresolved.

Drivers at Abellio immediately challenged the legitimacy of an online "survey" used by Unite to end industrial action. Its survey was also variously described as a "consultative ballot", but such ballots are non-binding. Unite claimed its sellout deal was accepted by a majority of drivers, but officials refused to even provide a vote tally.

A determined three-month strike by almost 2,000 drivers was overturned by Unite with a two-sentence text message Friday morning:

"Unite members have voted to accept the employers offer. Reps will be meeting on Monday to discuss next steps following which there will be further communication."

Drivers responded with fury, slamming Unite's underhand tactics. "I was told this was a 'Consultative Ballot'", wrote a driver from Beddington garage who added, "A CONSULTATIVE BALLOT has no legal mandate. So the issue of accept or reject does not arise. Therefore I would like to know which deal has been accepted? Who is fooling who??"

On January 26, drivers had rejected the very same company offer by a margin of 786 votes to 373. The resounding No vote defied a union recommendation to accept, signed by Unite officials Bobby Morton, Guy Langston and Onay Kasab. The below-inflation deal was also recommended by the Abellio London and West London Shop Stewards Committee.

Unite responded by bulldozing drivers' democratic mandate, openly colluding with the company to

demand their members vote again on the deal they had rejected just days earlier.

On Friday, Unite remained silent on the details of their online survey. They have refused to disclose how many drivers took part, by what margin drivers supposedly voted in favour of the below-inflation deal, or how, where, and by whom the votes were counted and scrutineered.

A message posted by a Unite member on Friday spoke of "disillusioned drivers that are now sitting back aghast as how our campaign/fight for better pay, terms, conditions has come to such a diabolical/shambolic end."

Abellio followed Unite's announcement with a "Briefing Note" to drivers from the Operations Director reading:

"Following the successful ballot result today, accepting the 13.5% pay deal and other improvements to the schedules, the industrial dispute has come to an end and strike action concluded. As a result, rest day working is reinstated with immediate effect for all drivers. We look forward to working together to rebuild relationships and the business."

The company's announcement was a pack of lies. The pay component fell way below 13.5 percent, with cuts to overtime rates leaving many drivers worse off. Scheduling changes will be decided by a hand-picked "working group" of company and Unite officials.

On Saturday, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee visited Southall and Hayes garages to speak with drivers. They slammed Unite's collusion with the bus operators, saying none of their core demands were met. One said:

"The union do not care about us, they care about the company. We are all on different rates of pay. New drivers are on around £13 an hour while older drivers

are on much more.

“Agency drivers are paid much more, and the company can afford to pay them but not us. When we all do the same job and some are paid more, how do you feel? If we had a union this would not happen.

“This dispute is not just about wages, it's all about conditions. We all have just 40-minutes' break, however long the shift. When I started, the average break was well over an hour. That's all gone now. Stand time is also the bare minimum, we have just five minutes. Also running time [the time allocated to get from one end of the route to the other] was 1 hour 20 minutes, now it's one hour only. They treat us like machines, that's all we are.

“I worked with First Group which was bought up by Metroline, and when they lost the route our contracts were different, and we didn't get a pay rise for two years. Why are we all different within the same union? We need to fight the union as much as we fight the company it seems.”

Drivers took leaflets from the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee (LBRFC), including recent statements and articles from the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Unite cancels London bus strikes at Abellio to enter talks” and “Abellio strike at crossroads: Defeat Unite's sabotage of London pay fight!”

Members of the LBRFC urged a campaign to reject Unite's overturn of the strike mandate and called for the election of rank-and-file committees at the garage to organise a fightback. Drivers took leaflets and left their contact details for further discussion.

The struggle at Abellio is the last of the London bus pay fights begun in 2022 amid an historic cost-of-living crisis caused by rampant corporate profiteering and exacerbated by the NATO-led war in Ukraine. In each case, drivers' desire for London-wide action to win an inflation-busting pay rise was thwarted by Unite.

Claims by Unite activists that newly elected General Secretary Sharon Graham was a “new broom” who would sweep out corruption and transform Unite into a “member led union” are in tatters. Graham and her lead officials have divided bus workers on a company-by-company basis, ramming through below-inflation pay deals without exception.

Unite's naked partnership with the bus operators and Transport for London exposes the efforts of pseudo-left groups, led by the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist

Party, who have assiduously promoted illusions that Graham and the bureaucracy can be pressured to fight for bus workers' interests.

The bureaucracy confronts the working class as a hostile force, dividing, blocking and suppressing its struggles, defending company profits and their own hefty pay packets and expense accounts that place Unite lead officers in the top 5-10 percent of income earners.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee urges Abellio drivers to convene garage meetings and overturn Unite's conspiracy against the democratic rights of its members. The dispute must not be ended on the company's terms! The 2023 pay fight must be taken forward by bus workers across London, calling for joint action with London Underground and rail workers against the gutting of pay, conditions, jobs and pension rights.

Workers have come face to face with the need for new organisations of mass struggle to defend the interests of the rank-and-file against an unaccountable bureaucracy. This is a political struggle against a Conservative government and Labour Party opposition enforcing austerity, wage suppression and the evisceration of basic democratic rights, including the right to strike.

We urge drivers to contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, share your views on the dispute at Abellio and any other information about the situation facing bus and transport workers. All submissions will be treated anonymously. Please send feedback [here](#).



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact