

Sharon Graham declares Unite's sell-out pay deal at Abellio London "an important victory"

Our reporters
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Following the Unite union's sabotage of a three-month pay fight by nearly 2,000 bus drivers at Abellio in London, General Secretary Sharon Graham has declared the under-inflation deal imposed by her lead officials "an important pay victory".

Graham's self-aggrandising statement, featured in a Unite press release Monday, has produced a wave of anger among bus workers who struck for more than 20 days since November 22, demanding £20 an hour and an end to punishing schedules that endanger drivers' physical and mental well-being.

"Workers have stood firm and with the support of their union, Unite, they have secured a richly deserved pay increase", Graham declared. "Unite's constant focus on the jobs, pay and conditions of our members is continuing to deliver increased pay awards for workers."

But Unite's "support" was reserved for Abellio not bus drivers. The "constant focus" of Graham and lead officials Guy Langston, Onay Kasab and Bobby Morton was to isolate Abellio drivers from their 23,000 colleagues across London, wear down resistance through repeated re-balloting, and recommending a company offer that opposed drivers' core demands during the 12-week dispute.

Drivers rejected the company-union agreement in a ballot on January 26, 786 votes to 373, but it was imposed by Unite via an online "survey" and non-binding "consultative ballot" which drivers rightly view as illegitimate.

Unite issued an announcement to Abellio members on Monday after a meeting of its lead officials, reps and the convenor, led by Kasab, Langston and Matthew Dore-Weeks. It was headlined, "MEMBERS VOTE TO ACCEPT OFFER". It began, "Unite members voted by 603 votes to 515 votes to accept the Abellio's latest offer. This ends the current strike."

Neither Unite's press release, nor its announcement could acknowledge the scale of deception overseen by the union's unaccountable bureaucracy. At a Zoom meeting on January

31, Unite Regional Officer Langston and Team Leader Dore-Weeks had repeatedly assured drivers that the online "survey" was simply to get their feedback on the direction of the dispute.

Unite's mafia-style tactics had already invited significant anger and suspicion, reflected in the low voter turnout and narrow margin to accept a company offer which enjoyed Unite's official recommendation.

A PR campaign swung into gear Monday, with Kasab appearing on BBC and Sky TV, dressing up the survey vote as a democratic mandate and portraying the deal as a "huge victory for our members".

Kasab, a leading member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, has deployed militant rhetoric throughout the dispute to conceal Unite's wheeling and dealing with company executives.

On WhatsApp and Facebook, drivers shared video clips of Kasab's TV appearances, challenging his deceptive claims about an "18 percent win", "a number of other follow-on payments that will see rises" and "improved scheduling arrangements in the future".

The 18 percent headline rate of an increase to £18 an hour applies only to senior drivers and TUPED drivers (transferred from other bus companies) and is offset by overtime rates pegged far below inflation. For this reason the deal is worth 13.5 percent across all elements. For day drivers, voluntary overtime Monday-Friday will rise by just 8 percent and 9 percent on weekends. For night drivers, voluntary overtime Monday-Friday will rise by only 6.6 percent, 8 percent on weekends and by 8 percent for involuntary overtime.

The deal cements the two-tier wage system which drivers were fighting to overcome with new starters (those with up to two years' service) receiving an uplift to just £15.05 an hour. For both senior and new drivers the uplifts to £18 and £15.05 an hour is for Monday to Friday with well below inflation increases for Saturday and Sunday shifts of around

9 and 4 percent respectively.

One member corrected Unite's trumpeting of 18 percent: "13% for new drivers... and it would have been 30% if you got £20 an hour". Unite officials early on junked drivers' strike demand for £20 an hour (base rate) across all grades.

Beneath a photo of Graham trumpeting a "pay deal worth 18%", a driver commented sarcastically, "Sharon Graham is the biggest winner".

Confronted with outrage over Unite's betrayal, including reports of mass resignations, the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) rushed forward on Monday with a pathetic apology for the trade union bureaucracy.

The SWP's article was headlined, "Drivers feel 'fooled' after Unite union ends Abellio strikes". It portrays Unite's underhand tactics as a mistake—a case of playing "fast and loose with the dispute"—rather than a deliberate policy by the bureaucracy aimed at suppressing wages and blocking a broader industrial and political offensive by the working class.

The SWP nevertheless hails the doubling of Unite's membership during the dispute while white-washing the strike's outcome. It promotes Abellio's below-inflation pay award enforced by Unite, concealing that basic rates for newer drivers and overtime rates across the board will leave ALL drivers struggling beneath the official RPI inflation rate (13.4 percent).

"The workers' action did achieve some further gains that will improve scheduling agreements within the next six months," the SWP claimed. In fact, the agreement sets up a "working group" of company and Unite officials and provides no guaranteed "improvements" of any kind.

The SWP's two-faced "criticisms" of Unite are aimed at subordinating workers to the bureaucracy. It speaks for privileged layers of the upper middle class who fear the emergence of a politically independent movement of the working class.

The SWP is working to block the development of independent rank-and-file committees that would challenge the domination of the bureaucracy based on the fight for socialism.

Abellio drivers spoke yesterday with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the groundswell of opposition to Unite's betrayal. A Battersea driver said, "The majority of drivers are not happy. Around 70-80 percent feel misled. This was not a victory. To call off the strikes for 30 pence an hour more on weekends is not why we had been going on strike over the past three months.

"Even before the dispute Abellio had offered around £17 an hour because they were losing drivers to other companies like Go-Ahead. In the space of a week Abellio lost around a 100 drivers.

"I rejected the deal in the consultation ballot. We were lied to—that this was a survey not a ballot. They lied through their teeth. Langston, Kasab and the others put their name to this deal. They would not answer that in the Zoom meeting when the driver brought up the WSWS article.

"Why did they need a survey to know what drivers were fighting for after three months?

"I know drivers in the north of England, I think it was Stagecoach, won a better deal but that was only because they carried on striking after Unite recommended the previous offers.

"This is happening everywhere, not just the buses. Rail, posties and nurses—look at their strike being called off in Wales for an extra 3 percent. It's only going to get worse. There needs to be a general strike. That would be really good."

A Southall driver said, "I wanted to keep striking and fighting for our rights but I feel the union was trying to close a deal a long time ago.

"I am a new driver on lower pay but I am working the same job as other drivers, working the same hours. That is why I joined Unite because they were saying that we are all equal and we all fight for our rights.

"At the beginning I had no idea. I thought that they were working for us and to support us, but now I feel they just want more members, because they doubled their membership.

"At the end, it was not only about money. We were fighting for the working conditions—to improve those conditions. Our shifts vary between 7 or 11 hours, and it doesn't matter how long you work for, you still only get the same meal break time. You may start early in the morning and finish late at night. People are tired. So we wanted the same shift for a whole week or a similar shift.

"Driving in London is tiring, your eyes get tired, you have to watch for cars and people, it's very stressful."



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