

London United bus drivers denounce Unite's below-inflation pay ballot

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The Unite union has foisted another below-inflation pay deal on London bus drivers—this time against more than 1,600 drivers at London United, owned by global transport giant RATP.

Bus drivers across seven garages in central and west London were balloted by Unite last Thursday on a pay offer of 6.4 percent (backdated to December) and a lump sum of £1,205. The offer is less than half the March RPI inflation rate of 13.5 percent. Even if the December 2022 anniversary pay date is used as a measure, RPI inflation was then 13.4 percent.

Unite insisted its members vote on what amounts to a pay cut. A lump sum payment was thrown in by the company to help Unite ram the deal through. Bill Cahill, RATP Dev managing director, claimed the combined pay offer amounted to an 8.8 percent rise, but the lump sum is a one-off payment that will be taxed.

Unite is expert at balloting its members on below-inflation pay deals to wear down resistance. An earlier below-inflation offer was taken back to drivers by Unite in a ballot March 17 and was rejected. RATP's offer then was for 6.4 percent and a £785 lump sum payment.

Unite is working with the bus operators across London to enforce wage suppression. In February, Unite betrayed three months of strikes by Abellio drivers, ending industrial action based on a non-binding “survey” it promoted with company executives.

Among 1,194 workers balloted Thursday, the company offer was accepted but with a large no vote. It passed with 657 votes in favour and 541 against, with majority no votes at four garages. A campaign to oppose RATP's wage suppression was more than possible, but such a fight means defying Unite's bureaucratic apparatus that works as an arm of management.

As WSWs reported last week, “Despite the growing militancy in the working class, wages are falling drastically behind inflation.” The average worker was more than 6 percent poorer this February than one year earlier, equivalent to £1,900 being taken from annual pay. This is the outcome

of the trade union leadership's suppression and betrayal of the strike movement that began last summer.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham (£90,000 + annual salary package) regularly announces below-inflation pay deals as victories, leaving workers drowning amid the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades. In the year to February 2023, gas prices rose by 129.4 percent, electricity by 66.7 percent, and food prices by 18.2 percent.

RATP Group is the world's third largest urban transport company, operating in 15 countries, with 71,000 employees. Its annual report for 2022 described “a year of recovery and continued expansion”, with consolidated turnover of €6.1 billion—a 10 percent annual increase. London United drivers operate 59 routes in the capital, carrying 271 million passengers a year.

While RATP profits declined sharply in 2022, the company used its higher turnover to pay down debt to global banks and make “fast paced” new investments strengthening the position of shareholders at the expense of its workforce. The company's annual accounts boast of “agreements” reached “with its labour union organisations regarding bus drivers' work schedules and hours, and mandatory annual negotiations.”

Drivers from London United spoke with WSWs after Thursday's ballot and explained the factors that swayed the vote for the deal. They were scathing about Unite's role in blocking a genuine pay fight at London United and more broadly.

Shepherd's Bush

A driver from Shepherd's Bush garage, where a majority of drivers voted to reject the deal, said his colleagues were frustrated by the outcome, “My garage always refuses the offer but other garages seem to accept. So some drivers started losing hope, so they don't vote. Some of them have

left the union because they don't believe in the process any more.

"There was something yesterday with the count of votes, with the spent papers, it didn't tally up. So I'm a bit like, unsure. But I'm disappointed with it. Everyone at my garage rejected it, so I don't know what the reps at other garages are doing."

He said the company and Unite used the lump sum amount to sway the vote, "Originally they offered an £800 lump sum. It was 6.4 percent with a lump sum payment, but we rejected that. Now it's a £1,200 lump sum, so everyone looked at that instead, not knowing that it's the hourly rate where you make most of your money. And they will tax that lump sum, so it's not going to be the full amount anyway."

The driver wanted to know more about the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, which is fighting to organise a fightback across London.

Stamford Brook

A driver from Stamford Brook said, "I don't think Unite wanted to go on strike. I don't think they are prepared to pay all of us £70 a day [strike money]. I don't think they wanted to go any further, and I believe they are very happy that we accepted the pay deal. I might be wrong, but that's what I believe."

The driver pointed to Unite's role in the recent Abellio dispute, "Believe me, a lot of bus drivers that I work with were not happy at that time. And a lot of them, in very high number, are not very happy that we accepted this pay deal yesterday. For the past few years Unite go to meetings that we are not aware of. They go to emergency meetings, representing us, but we have no idea what was talked about. We've never been told what happened, nothing at all. So to be honest I think Unite has been doing their own stuff."

"But at the same time we've got union reps at every garage. At Stamford Brook we've got a very amazing one. But overall the way they do business, I don't believe is fair, I don't believe it is very professional, and I don't think it's the way forward. If we are paying £4.84 a week, that's nearly £20 a month. I think we deserve basic respect. We deserve to know what's going on, and where we're going."

The driver had no faith in the company's promise to "review" pay rates in July if inflation is above 8.8 percent CPI, "It's not going to be straight forward because every year we are always late by about six months with the pay award. We were supposed to get this back in December. So every year we are playing some catch up game. And a lot of

bus drivers are sick and tired. They don't want to go on and on. That's the actual reason they accept the deal. They don't want to go on another four weeks, another two months. I don't think it's a fair deal, and I think the company's winning and I think the company got what it wanted in the end.

"I expected a majority to accept it. And it's understandable because they got pushed to accept it. There was notes inside the garage saying 'a lumpsum of £1,200 blah blah blah'. There was nothing saying, 'It's not a good deal'. I do understand that Unite can't tell us what to vote, but I was expecting at least some sort of advice to say, 'This is less than inflation. It's up to you what you want to do, but I don't think it's a good offer.' That did not happen. If it had, then it would have been a different outcome."

"I've been a bus driver for the last eight years. This job that we do is not easy. In terms of taking the bus from one place to another, it's not that hard. But in terms of mental capacity, you're doing one week early morning, next week late, the next week middle and then you go back to morning. You do seven days in a row, sometimes eight. Sometimes you don't get to see your family because when you start work they went to school already. By the time you finish it's 2.30 in the morning so it's a very stressful job. Bus drivers deserve better, a better working environment. A lot of us suffer stress every single day."

"During COVID, the managers came out and said 'You should be happy that you've got a job'. A friend of mine, a bus driver, passed away from COVID. It was very hard for me to take, but at the same time we had to push ourselves, we had to come to work. At that time, everybody was clapping for us. Everybody in London was saying well done. But then the company, as soon as everything came back to normal a little bit, we went from heroes to zeroes. All of a sudden they said to us, 'We'll offer you a 1.5 percent pay rise'. A few months ago we were heroes. But not anymore."

Send us your feedback on the conditions facing bus drivers. Your anonymity will be protected. For more information, contact the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.



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