

Unite calls off strike action at Arriva London North

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The Unite trade union suspended strike action planned to begin at Arriva London North today. More than 1,700 bus drivers were due to strike Tuesday-Wednesday this week and next over a derisory pay offer.

A Unite press release stated the action had been called off “as a gesture of goodwill” following “an improved pay offer”, which it did not specify. Drivers had previously overwhelmingly rejected a 7 percent pay rise, with RPI inflation currently running at over 11 percent.

The union is following its old playbook of dividing its members and grinding down their resistance with a series of called-off strikes and ballots on substandard pay offers.

Workers at Arriva London North were already separated from their colleagues in Arriva London South, fighting the same company over the same issue in the same city. Unite members at depots in the south had also rejected a pay offer, but by the time members in the north were due to be striking, the union was still only at the stage of balloting Arriva London South.

Rather than organise a real struggle, Unite is constantly seeking to create the best conditions for a climbdown and sellout of its members’ interests. Regional Officer Steve Stockwell commented on suspending strike action at Arriva London North, “From the outset Unite has been clear that Arriva could and should make an improved offer and that has proved to be the case. It is now up to our members to decide if the offer is sufficient to meet their expectations.”

Members have not been given an opportunity to voice their expectations. By not setting a pay demand, the union bureaucracy allows Arriva to come back with a series of marginal increases which it then uses as an excuse to call off action and sabotage the struggle.

Speaking to drivers at Arriva London North’s large Tottenham garage, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters found workers determined to fight for a real-terms wage increase in solidarity with Arriva London South and all bus and London transport workers.

One told the WSWs, “I voted to strike. Seven percent is nowhere near RPI. We need a big pay rise. We are low paid for what we do. £13.50 an hour for the stress we face. I’m constantly on the lookout and exhausted. I don’t know why Arriva South is not striking they’ve been offered the same.”

Another said, “I voted in favour of a strike and did not think the offer of 7 percent was enough. I go to the shops and prices have doubled, petrol has gone up, look at gas and electric. We have to strike. I think an all London bus drivers’ strike would be right; we all have the same financial difficulties.”

A third commented, “I want a pay rise matching RPI at least. Everything’s going up. The rents are impossible, then there’s also gas and food. It feels like there’s a general deterioration of workers’ rights. We’re going back to Thatcher.

He added, “I don’t understand these divisions between transport workers; we’re all doing the same job. It doesn’t make sense at all that we’re kept separate from Arriva South.”

Bus drivers have also been raising concerns about the high temperatures and humid conditions as summer begins. Last year’s 40-plus degree heat in London saw temperatures in un-airconditioned drivers’ cabins push 50 degrees, with many workers protesting by stopping and abandoning or refusing to drive overheated busses.

Attempting to nip any such disruption for its corporate partners in the bud this year, Unite has launched a phony campaign demanding all busses be fitted with air conditioning within 12 months! The

union is requesting that drivers be allowed to stop working where temperatures inside the cabin exceed 30 degrees for more than one hour, but drivers report conditions becoming unworkable past 27 degrees.

The third worker the WSWs reporters spoke to at Tottenham explained, “Some busses have AC, some do but it doesn’t work.” The heat was “unbearable. How is someone supposed to work in that? It’s not good for the passengers and it’s hell for the drivers. Animals get treated better.”

Describing Unite, he said, “Watching the union negotiate with the company, it’s like a revolving door. They go in for pay talks, they come out with an offer, we send it back, they go back in, they come straight out with their tails between their legs saying it’s not really possible, this is the way things are, and on and on.”

This militant sentiment has existed among bus workers for years, especially since the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic when they were simultaneously proved to be key workers in society and treated like dirt by Transport for London and all the private operators. But Unite has acted to suppress it.

Last year, the union again divided Arriva drivers in North and South London, first ramming through a massively below inflation 3.5 percent pay rise at Arriva London South in May—promising to take up a fight for 15 percent in the future—then pressuring workers to accept a still below inflation 11 percent at Arriva London North in September. Both deals were pushed through narrowly, over the opposition of hundreds of drivers.

In this latest dispute, talk of a 15 percent pay rise has been dropped entirely. It comes a month after Unite foisted another below-inflation deal on 1,600 drivers at London United—again with substantial opposition. Two months before that, this February, the union used a dodgy survey to end three months of industrial action at Abellio and impose a deal already rejected by drivers. Drivers at Arriva South London’s Brixton garage will recognise such underhand tactics.

Workers can expect the same merry-go-round of divided strikes, cancelled actions and endless pay offer ballots year after year—getting poorer in real terms all the while—until they begin to take action into their own hands. Drivers across the city have taken the initiative by forming the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee to oppose Unite’s sellouts of workers’ struggles.

Bus workers’ strength is in their unity, not only across London but nationally and internationally. Announcing the Arriva North strike, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham repeated her nationalist pitch suggesting the source of London bus drivers’ problems is money being taken to Germany, and appealing to Arriva to change its ways: “Arriva... needs to be concentrating on paying its workers fairly rather than providing the German government with huge dividends.”

But money kept in the UK does not make its way into workers’ pockets any more than money paid to Germany end up with German workers. Both groups share a common fight to secure decent living standards from a multibillion pound/euro company exploiting them for all they’re worth. One of the main functions of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is to reach out to and unify workers around the world with a programme of international solidarity.

The Committee calls on Arriva bus workers to get in touch and share their thoughts on the situation.



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