

UK bus workers at Go North East escalate strike in fight against poverty pay

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Around 1,300 bus workers at Go North East (GNE) began continuous strike action October 28 in their determined fight for a pay rise against the local bus division of the highly profitable transport giant Go Ahead Group.

The action involves bus drivers, engineers, maintenance crews and administration and clerical staff at six depots in the north-east of England—Consett, Gateshead, Hexham, Percy Main, Sunderland and Washington.

The members of the Unite union had already carried out two separate weeks of stoppages from September 30-October 6 and October 14-20 after voting for industrial action in mid-September by a 98 percent majority on an 85 percent turnout. They have rejected reported offers of 9.6 and 9.11 percent with terms and conditions under threat.

The escalation of the strike began after GNE bus workers rejected a new offer tabled by the company reported to be 10.3 percent and an above inflation pay rise for next year. This was voted down by an 81 percent majority on a 93 percent turnout in the result announced October 27.

The offer in no way compensated for the fact that GNE bus workers have not received a pay rise for the past 5 years, accounting for inflation. Opposition has also been fuelled by the disparity in pay with their counterparts at other Go Ahead bus operations. The pay uplift from £12.83 per hour to £14.15 would still have left them lagging behind bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester on £15.53 per hour.

After the overwhelming rejection of the latest offer, Unite described the proposal as “insulting”. This did not prevent the union from bringing it back for a vote even as it reported a survey of members at GNE showing they had to skip meals and use foodbanks

because of low pay. The result was announced less than 24 hours before the escalation of strike action was due to commence in a deliberate attempt to demobilise the fight.

Unite press statements only refer to a “fair pay increase” with no demand even for the 20 percent required for parity pay and no mention of opposing any concessions on terms and conditions GNE will demand in return.

GNE bus workers can place no faith in Unite and its General Secretary Sharon Graham. They must draw up their own red lines in this dispute and demand oversight of all further negotiations, rather than closed-door meetings of the company and Unite officials. They must reach out to other bus workers to develop a unified counteroffensive against the restrictions imposed by Unite from above.

Graham has stated, “Their [GNE’s] parent company is awash with cash, they pay their CEO six figure salaries and yet, as our survey shows, they pay their workforce such low wages they are forcing them to use foodbanks to feed their families.”

Such pro-forma condemnations of corporate greed have routinely been followed by sellout deals struck by Unite with private operators across the UK.

Unite’s official backing for strike action only ever comes with the precondition of the complete isolation of any dispute. This has served to undermine the collective power bus workers have to reverse the effects of decades of privatisation and the continued race to the bottom. Whatever modified changes have been made in originally insulting pay offers have been the small price paid by management for services rendered by Graham in quashing a unified fightback.

Examples of the sellouts arising from locally quarantined actions at different private operators

include: a pay deal just £1 an hour above the minimum wage at Stagecoach South Wales in 2021; the below inflation pay deal and maintenance of the tiers system at Arriva Yorkshire in 2022; and the below inflation deal at Abellio in London in February 2023, betraying the demand from the lowest paid bus drivers in the capital for a pay rise to £20 an hour.

Unite's apparatus from national to local level has worked to grind down resistance and jettison the original demands of strikers. In the case of Abellio, the union stooped to using a dodgy survey to end three months of industrial action and impose a deal already rejected by bus drivers.

Under Graham's leadership, the Unite bureaucracy has continued to serve as an extended arm of the companies to police the explosion of workers struggles arising from the pandemic and mounting cost-of-living crisis.

GNE business director Ben Maxfield has publicly hit back at demands for parity pay with Go North West, stating "they are on different rostering arrangements and different conditions."

This is a reference to the rotten deal enforced by Unite with Go Ahead to betray the 11-week strike in 2021 by 400 bus drivers at Queens Road depot in Manchester. Unite's fabled victory involved the withdrawal of new substandard contracts on the proviso that the union worked with the company to implement over £1 million cuts. The inferior terms were brought in with the direct collusion of Unite and included a year-long pay freeze, redundancies, reduced sick pay, unpaid meal breaks and compulsory overtime. GNE bus workers can read here the verdict of their colleagues in the north-west on the agreement and role of Unite.

In isolating the longest bus strike in generations Unite also promoted as false friends of embattled bus workers local Labour Party figures such as Salford MP Rebecca Long Bailey. The Corbynite showed her "support" by arguing for the concessions-laden contract Unite rubber stamped to throttle the fight.

Go Ahead was rewarded for its corporatist relationship with Unite and Labour last December by being handed the first two contracts by Labour Mayor Andy Burnham under the new Greater Manchester franchising system. The company boasts the 55 routes in Bolton and Wigan will bring in £400 million in revenue over seven years, with the livery painted

yellow and given pride of place as part of the new Bee Network.

GNE bus workers must break out of the straitjacket imposed by the Unite apparatus. Graham routinely speaks of "leverage campaigns", meaning appeals to management and investors. The real "leverage" workers have is through class unity, including across the national boundaries jointly exploited by Go Ahead Group—with global revenues of £3.2 billion.

The bus and rail transnational has a workforce of 25,000 across seven countries, owned jointly by Australian based transport company Kinetic Group and Spanish transport infrastructure firm Globalvia. It is the largest operator of bus services in London and has 11 percent of the market in the rest of the UK. Chief executive Christian Scheyer received a bonus of £540,000 for the year ending July 2022, bringing his salary to £976,000. Even though its overall profits were down, the company still raked in £84.7 million from its bus operations.

The London Bus Workers Rank-and-File Committee has fought to develop a unified struggle of bus workers nationally and internationally against the actions of the Unite bureaucracy under Graham to nip such a development in the bud. We encourage GNE bus workers to get in contact and discuss how your fight can be supported and expanded.

Make your voice heard! Tell us about conditions in your workplace. All submissions will be kept anonymous.



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