

UK: Unite enforces sellout pay deal at Go North East bus dispute to end all out strike action

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All-out strike action by 1,300 bus workers at Go North East (GNE) has been ended with a sellout pay deal engineered by Unite.

Drivers and depot staff at GNE's six garages in the north-east of England were re-balloted on a revised offer from the company as the strike entered its fifth week, with Unite recommending the deal. Following further talks a re-ballot was held from November 28 with the result announced December 1.

The pay award accepted by a narrow majority of Unite members is just 10.5 percent from July 1 (backdated), with an incremental increase of 0.7 percent from January 2024. A further increase will take place on July 1 in line with RPI inflation subject to a minimum increase of 4 percent.

Unite's press release on December 1 was headlined, "Unite secures significant pay victory for Go North East workers."

But the pay award is a slap in the face to GNE bus workers' determined fight. They escalated action to an all-out strike from October 28 having a 10.3 percent offer for this year after two earlier one-week stoppages.

Unite's so-called "tough negotiating stance" resulted in a revised pay deal worth only 0.2 percent more immediately than the rejected offer and a further 0.7 percent from January. Unite has rowed back in the most shameless manner using the same "smoke and mirrors" employed to sell bus workers short in dozens of other disputes.

The unions' official pay demand was 13 percent. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham had proclaimed the union would no longer accept their members in the north-east of England being treated as cheap labour by Go Ahead Group.

Unite's campaign regularly featured comparisons of GNE drivers' pay of £12.83 per hour with their counterparts at Go North West in Manchester on £15.53 per hour. But after all elements of the two-year deal are factored in, GNE drivers' pay will rise to just £14.84 per hour.

Unite's collusion with GNE faced stiff resistance, with the revised offer receiving 749 in favour and 658 against. The yes vote included engineers and administrators for a majority of just 53.2 percent. Among drivers the majority was less than 1 percent, with 616 in favour and 609 against.

Unite continued its talks with GNE even after the company mounted a strike-breaking operation against workers from November 14.

In their return-to-work announcement after the ballot results, Unite officials made clear they were ending the dispute with victimised GNE workers still suspended. It read, "Any member who received a letter of suspension should not return to work until contacted, this will be done as quickly as possible."

It is not clear how many bus workers have been singled out by management for disciplinary action in connection with the dispute, but what is not in doubt is the willingness of Unite officials to hang them out to dry. Graham's cynicism is limitless, hailing a "pay victory" and bus workers "standing together" even as Unite officials trample the basic principle of an "Injury to one is an injury to all."

Graham's PR spin has been bolstered by Unite national lead officer Onay Kasab, a leading member of the Socialist Party (SP), "I'm delighted our members have secured this substantial pay increase. Thanks to their tireless efforts on the picket lines and at protests

they have secured the pay increase they deserve.”

Graham and Kasab used their influence to convince GNE workers nothing more was possible, while they worked to isolate and wear down the dispute.

But significantly, almost half GNE’s bus workers defied Unite officials and were prepared to continue fighting. If the rank-and-file had their own strike committee, they could have put forward their own pay demands and rallied the support of all GNE workers. A rank-and-file committee could have countered Unite’s propaganda and reached across the entire Go Ahead Group bringing the collective power of bus workers into the struggle.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) outlined such a strategy in its article last month, “End Unite’s isolation of the Go North East bus dispute to defeat strikebreaking operation”. We warned: “Graham’s call for a ‘reasonable new offer’ shows that the union leadership are not serious about the demand for parity. Any further crumbs from GNE would be used to suspend the action for a re-ballot, a method used to grind down opposition and sell out numerous strikes at Stagecoach, Arriva and Abellio where core demands were shelved.

“The rank-and-file must now draw up their own red lines for the 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.”

If GNE workers were blindsided by the sellout, responsibility for this rests with pseudo-left organisations such as the Socialist Workers Party and SP who falsely promoted her as a clean broom and self-appointed “workers candidate” when Graham was elected general secretary in August 2021 with barely 4 percent of votes cast.

Such pseudo-left groups seek to bolster the grip of the trade union bureaucracy over the working class, claiming the likes of Graham can be “pressured” to fight the companies and the government. Leading members of the SWP and SP—such as Onay Kasab—have been drawn into the upper ranks of the bureaucracy to police rank-and-file militancy and block any organised challenge to Unite’s pro-company agenda.

Over the past three years, Graham’s “leverage”

strategy in dozens of pay disputes has been directed to corporate boardrooms and shareholders, opposing any joint mobilisation of bus workers against the companies’ ruthless drive for profit. At GNE, Graham appealed for talks with parent company Go Ahead Group’s chief executive and arranged a trip to Canada where Unite officials urged the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)—the largest shareholder of the company—to pressure the multinational transport company “to treat working people decently”.

Unite’s pro-corporate orientation was used to isolate GNE workers’ struggle, entrench Unite’s partnership with the company and bring back a sellout agreement. At Go North West in Manchester, Graham’s “leverage” strategy in 2021 was used to betray an 11-week strike on terms dictated by the company.

As the WSWS wrote last month: “The allies of GNE workers are not in the boardroom of the Go Ahead Group or its shareholders, but among the 25,000 workers employed by the bus and rail transnational across seven countries, whose joint exploitation accounts for its £3.2 billion annual revenues and its profits. This is the real leverage which must be mobilised in a fight across national borders in opposition to the pro-company apparatus headed by Graham.”

At GNE, rank-and-file drivers and engineers should call for the immediate and unconditional reinstatement of all workers suspended and victimised during the dispute. The next stage of the fight will be to defend terms and conditions which will be targeted. Unite officials have shown they are lined up with the company. We encourage GNE workers to make contact with the WSWS and share their experiences on pay and working conditions and discuss a unified fightback.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact