

Metroline bus drivers continue strike as Unite and Labour Mayor Andy Burnham shut down unified Greater Manchester action

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Strike action by 2,000 Greater Manchester bus drivers at Stagecoach, First Bus and Metroline scheduled for Tuesday to Thursday this week was largely suspended at the last minute by Unite in collusion with Labour Mayor Andy Burnham.

Last weekend Burnham convened closed-door talks with Unite officials and bus company executives which cooked up revised offers to be voted on to avert a repeat of the coordinated strike action between September 19–22. That action by drivers at all three companies against derisory pay offers shut down two-thirds of the Bee Network bus services, operated by private firms under franchising arrangements with the Labour authority.

Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) posted on its website at 9:15 p.m. Sunday:

“Unite the union has today confirmed that strikes will be suspended whilst it ballots members at First and Stagecoach on a revised offer. It is hoped staff at Metroline will agree the same approach tomorrow (Monday 29) meaning all buses across Greater Manchester would run as normal this week.”

Unite’s collusion with Burnham failed to stop 1,000 Metroline drivers striking at depots in Sharston, Hyde Road, Ashton and Wythenshawe. The revised offer—from 3.5 per cent to 8.8 percent—is a repackaged, substandard deal spread over two years. Stagecoach is using the same sleight of hand, with Unite agreeing to ballot 1,000 drivers on a deal the company cynically describes as “an almost nine percent pay increase by April 2026.”

No details have been released about the new offer at First Bus. Its 110 drivers previously rejected an “improved” offer of a 6 percent increase for this year to

an 8.8 percent over two years—as they are currently paid just £15 an hour, the lowest rate in the region. The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Unite’s press office to ask how the new offers compared with those already rejected but received no response.

Stagecoach, First and Metroline are raking in profits from drivers’ labour and that of transport workers globally, with the three transnationals enjoying outsourcing deals worldwide like those in Greater Manchester.

FirstGroup’s operating profit for last year was £204 million and share dividends were increased by 45 percent on the previous year. Stagecoach reported pre-operating profits of £51 million for last year, up from £33 million. Metroline’s parent company, Singapore-based ComfortDelGro, recorded a £60 million operating profit from its UK and European bus operations in the first half of 2025—boosted by new Greater Manchester contracts worth £422 million over five years.

Unite is once again carving up a struggle it promised would be coordinated, bending it into the Labour mayor’s franchising framework, which sacrifices pay and conditions for corporate profit.

Burnham expressed his hostility to strike action from the start, demanding its suspension and pleading poverty on behalf of three of the largest bus monopolies in the UK. He insisted Greater Manchester and the country “was not awash with money.” While cultivating a “soft left” image and positioning himself as a possible successor to Keir Starmer as Labour Party leader, Burnham is no less committed to the government’s pro-business, anti-working-class agenda in Greater Manchester.

As a bus driver told the WSWWS during the earlier strike, “Burnham is a hypocrite. According to him, it’s supposed to be a good public network now but it’s still private bus companies taking money off the public.”

After his weekend talks with Unite and the private operators to suspend the strike Burnham declared:

“This is positive progress and we’re pleased that union colleagues have now agreed to suspend strike action to ballot their members. We encourage staff at Metrolink to do the same... I have been clear that we support the aims of the unions—bus drivers deserve a better deal. But it has to be delivered in a way that’s affordable and sustainable for the Bee Network.”

As the defiance of Metrolink drivers already shows, Burnham relied on his connections with the Unite bureaucracy to undermine the rank-and-file to buttress a corporatist framework with the private operators. What he calls “affordable and sustainable for the Bee Network” are crumbs for bus workers while Stagecoach, First and Metrolink rake in millions from contracts with the Labour authority.

Stagecoach Manchester managing director Rob Jones praised the “positive weekend talks between Stagecoach and Unite,” while First Bus Rochdale general manager Paul Townley said, “We would like to thank our Unite colleagues for the constructive talks on planned industrial action.”

In Unite’s September 29 press release headlined “Manchester Bee Network Metrolink bus strike to go ahead,” General Secretary Sharon Graham wrote:

“Metrolink has consistently put profits before people throughout this dispute and workers have quite rightly had enough. Bus drivers do difficult and important jobs and deserve to be paid fairly. They will have Unite’s full backing throughout the industrial action.”

Bus workers are meant to believe that Stagecoach and First Bus have suddenly been overtaken by generosity, with Metrolink the only outlier. It is an attempt to put a gloss on the paltry sums Stagecoach and First Bus are willing to grant in exchange for Unite acting as their industrial police force and isolating continued resistance at Metrolink.

The WSWWS warned before the strike began:

“Greater Manchester bus drivers at Stagecoach, Metrolink and First Bus must establish a joint strike committee to take control of the dispute. They should demand complete oversight over further pay

negotiations and not allow Unite officials to suspend the action prior to proper scrutiny of any revised offer at mass meetings before a vote is taken.”

This has been vindicated by the sabotage by Unite officials of the joint action. The deals drawn up between Unite and Stagecoach/First Bus executives must be rejected to make a joint stand with Metrolink drivers.

Establishing a joint strike committee of trusted workers from the shop floor—not full-time bureaucrats—would provide the basis for appealing to workers beyond Greater Manchester, both nationally and internationally at the three companies and other private operators.

This includes workers at Greater Manchester’s Metrolink tram and light rail service who have rejected a below inflation offer of 3.2 percent. Unite has organised a strike ballot of its 200 members which closes October 1, claiming to be organising action across Greater Manchester. But the suspension of the bus strikes shows that a coordinated fight can only be waged by the rank-and-file in opposition to the union apparatus.

The Metrolink is part of the Bee Network, but is run under franchise by the private consortium Keolis/Amey—exposing the Labour authority’s claim to be running a public transport system rather than a glorified outsourcing operation.

It is the corporate oligarchy that must foot the bill, but their entrenched opposition to workers receiving a cost-of-living increase underscores the necessity of taking services out of private hands and back into public ownership under workers’ control. There is no lack of resources or money, the issue is who controls it and on what basis is it allocated, corporate profit or social need. Waging a powerful industrial struggle must be combined with this political perspective.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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