

Unite ends Greater Manchester bus strikes on Labour mayor and private operators' terms

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On Tuesday evening, Unite published a press release announcing that around 2,000 Stagecoach and Metroline drivers had accepted a revised pay offer of 12 percent over two years, ending the pay dispute in Greater Manchester which was launched through a joint strike with their colleagues at First Bus last month. This comes as hundreds of workers employed by Transport for Greater Manchester, also represented by Unite, as well as Unison, begin their own series of walkouts.

The Unite leadership had already assumed veto powers over the right of workers at Stagecoach and Metroline to meet and agree the deal before strike action was suspended less than a day before walkouts on October 10, 11 and 13. This was to foist on drivers at the seven garages an agreement drawn up behind closed doors between union officials, the bus companies, and Labour Mayor Andy Burnham.

The Unite statement hails a "vastly improved offer," but provides no information on the voting figures among members to accept. General Secretary Sharon Graham declared, "This is an excellent, well-deserved win for our members at Stagecoach and Metroline who took on their employers in the fight for better pay and won. It proves the power of a union."

The deals struck are not the result of the fight bus workers sought to wage, but of the collusion of the Unite apparatus with the private operators and Burnham to protect Greater Manchester's franchise arrangements with three of the largest and most profitable bus companies in the UK under the umbrella of the Bee Network. Sabotage by the union bureaucracy ensured that after the first joint strike on September 19–22, there was no further collective action.

The union apparatus had already called off the previous strike action between September 30 and October 2, following the initial closed-door talks a

fortnight ago with the private operators and Burnham. A thousand Metroline drivers still walked out, refusing to entertain the offer of 8.8 percent over two years. Unite reported that 1,000 drivers at Stagecoach then voted "overwhelmingly" to reject the revised 9 percent offer the union deemed worthy of a ballot.

That act of sabotage succeeded in peeling away the 110 First Bus drivers at the Rochdale garage from the ongoing fight. The accepted revised offer was based on a headline figure of 20 percent over two years, dressing up a pay uplift which is split over four stages. This did not meet the basic criteria of pay parity for the lowest-paid bus drivers in the region, as Unite's press release declaring an "exceptional pay award" acknowledged.

Unite then doubled down on its collaboration with Burnham, Stagecoach and Metroline executives to table this latest revised offer, under conditions in which more than 90 percent of workers still engaged in the dispute were due to walk out, bringing into focus the discontent of the rank-and-file with these manoeuvres.

The "exceptional offer" trumpeted by Unite is 5.9 percent backdated to April 2025 and 5.9 percent from April 2026. This is only a little over the present RPI inflation rate at 4.6 percent and will be rapidly eaten up by debts workers have incurred including the rise in essential household bills for energy, water, and council tax above official inflation figures.

Graham began the dispute with pro-forma denunciations of the bus companies "lining their pockets," but as in every other case this has made way for the "acceptable offers" the private profiteers deem affordable. As she stated, "Unite is pleased the bus companies came to their senses."

Stagecoach reported pre-operating profits of £51 million for last year, up from £33 million the year before. 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.

These well-resourced, globally organised transnationals profit from the labour of transport workers around the globe through the same type of outsourcing arrangements First Bus, Stagecoach, and Metroline enjoy with the Greater Manchester Labour authority. But for the Unite apparatus, it is never an issue of challenging the grip they exercise over public services or organising a unified fight by the working class against the corporate oligarchy.

In the hands of the Unite bureaucracy, the strikes were only a bargaining chip with the mayor and private operators to demonstrate its role as partner in policing opposition among bus drivers. Graham has insisted that Unite have a seat at the table of Greater Manchester's franchising model, rather than mobilising opposition against this managed form of privatisation which has ensured the race to the bottom has continued for the past two years—at the expense of pay, terms, and conditions.

Not only does this ensure payouts to shareholders, it means the local authority can curb spending on public transport through the cutthroat competition to win bids. This is what Burnham meant when he lectured bus workers that the region and the country are “not awash with money”—as billions nationally are transferred out of the public coffers into the hands of the corporations or diverted to war and rearmament.

Burnham’s partnership with “our trade union colleagues” is his preferred method of suppressing strike action.

The Unite press release ends by acknowledging fundamental issues excluded from the pay dispute: “Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) and Mayor Andy Burnham have also given their commitments to Unite that they will look into historical issues in the passenger transport sector in the city, such as access to toilets, adequate breaks and better pension schemes.”

Unite presents as good coin the standard fob off to “look into” matters. The “historical issues”—ill health caused by lack of basic amenities, exhaustion caused by denial of sufficient rest periods, and inferior retirement schemes—are all issues Graham and the Unite leadership have paid lip service to for years while

allowing them to fester.

The bus companies will seek to claw back the concessions they have made on pay through cost-cutting at workers’ expense, with industrial action off the agenda for the next two years.

We encourage bus drivers to speak out against the sabotage of their unified struggle against the private operators and what the “excellent” pay deals mean for them. The unity of bus workers across depots and companies can only be established by forming rank-and-file committees, independent from the union’s bureaucratic apparatus, which will champion workers conditions, safety and dignity.



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