

# Greater Manchester tram drivers to strike over fatigue

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Metrolink's 320 tram drivers in Greater Manchester are set to strike on December 19, 20 and New Years Eve, in a dispute against fatigue due to overwork and insufficient rest breaks.

They are directly employed by private consortium Keolis Amey, which operates the largest tram system in the UK. Metrolink serves a population of 3 million on a network of 99 stops across eight lines, 64 miles of track, which handled 45 million journeys last year.

Keolis Amey operates within the patchwork of outsourcing arrangements presented as an "integrated transport system"—the Bee Network—run by Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) under Labour Mayor Andy Burnham.

The gruelling conditions tram drivers face at Metrolink's Warwick Road South and Queens Road depots expose what lies beneath this public facade. The current shift patterns mean drivers are expected to work 450 hours over a 12-week period, forcing them into cycles of having to work 50 hours on, followed by just two days off work, followed by another 50-hour week pattern. Many drivers can work six days in a row. They have some of the most punishing working conditions nationally: duties can last up to 9 hours 30 minutes, with maximum driving time of 5 hours 30 minutes and only a 30-minute meal break.

The trams weigh 40 tonnes without passengers and travel through congested city streets. Drivers warn that without improvements to their shift patterns and meal breaks it is not a case of *if* an accident will occur but *when*—especially with Christmas markets increasing the footfall of pedestrians crossing roads.

The vote for strike action at the end of November shows a clear determination by tram drivers to act collectively to prevent a tragedy occurring and to demand working conditions that do not destroy their

physical and mental health.

Their union, Unite, has pledged to secure improvements, but its officials already prevented strike action mandated by tram drivers between December 5-7. This was suspended on December 2 to present new proposals by the employer which were overwhelmingly rejected by tram drivers.

Unite's statement before the ballot was a tacit endorsement of the company's position. Unite named five days of action, but this was only intended as a bargaining chip with the employer to cobble together a sellout deal and avert strike action.

Unite regional officer Colin Hayden's statement on the ballot offered kudos to the company: "Following escalation of the strike action, Metrolink has come forward with potential improvements and solutions with fatigue and rotas."

In the same press release the union stated, "If the ballot is unsuccessful, strike action on 19, 20 and 31 December will go ahead."

The definition of a "successful ballot" is therefore whether it allows Unite to call off strike action not meet worker's demands!

The offer from the company was a fob off: tram drivers were balloted on new rotas with additional rest days, but the company admitted it could take up to two years to recruit the 60 drivers needed to implement them.

It was only after ballot rejection that Unite officials criticised the deal. This is out of the playbook used by Unite in every dispute; after trying to push through a rotten deal on the quiet, citing members approval, officials then make hot air declarations to maintain control. Hayden stated that members had rejected promises of "jam tomorrow," while Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said, "The fatigue problem

needs to be fixed now.”

Tram drivers cannot entrust their dispute to the Unite apparatus, which attempted to sabotage their struggle before it even started. They have been given an early warning that they must take charge of the strategy to win their fight. This must include no secret talks and full oversight over any proposals: no suspension of action before tram drivers have had time to study, discuss and vote on proposals.

Most importantly tram drivers must draw up their own demands. Improved conditions and public safety must be asserted against the profit interests of Keolis Amey. There is every likelihood Unite officials will try to scupper their action again. Tram drivers are in a strong position to enforce their demands based on their central role in keeping the city moving, with the scheduled action coinciding with the busiest time of year for hospitality on December 19 and for shopping on December 20.

Hayden and Graham claimed “full support” to bus drivers at Stagecoach, Metroline and First Bus in Greater Manchester, who came forward earlier this year to fight pay erosion by some of the most profitable bus companies in the UK operating under the license of TfGM. Unite officials entered repeated backroom talks with company executives—brokered by Burnham—to chip away at the unified struggle. The revised deals imposed on a company-by-company basis meant no parity on pay for First Bus drivers with other Greater Manchester bus drivers and settlements at Metroline and Stagecoach barely denting inflation.

These were touted by Graham as another example of Unite’s “victories”, but bus drivers told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) these were accepted reluctantly and criticised union officials for delaying their strikes and using the backpay element to get them over the line. Drivers’ own longstanding grievances over fatigue have been swept under the carpet as Unite hailed an improved partnership with TfGM.

Tram drivers scheduled strike will coincide with stoppages by 200 Unite members on December 13, 19 and 20 who work for TfGM. This is part of an ongoing dispute alongside 400 members of Unison by TfGM bus and tram network route planners, engineers, IT, administrative and customer service staff against a below inflation pay award of 3.2 percent. They have been involved in staggered strike action since October,

but TfGM has refused to make any improvement to what is a real terms pay cut.

Rather than separate disputes, transport workers in Greater Manchester are in open revolt against low pay and exhaustion that is the direct outcome of the pro-market model overseen by Burnham. The “soft left” Labourite is being groomed as a possible successor to Sir Keir Starmer as prime minister. The experiences of transport workers in Greater Manchester shows he would govern as a representative of big business and enforcing austerity.

The Bee Network, launched in September last year with the entire bus network brought under local authority control and run by TfGM since January, has been presented by Burnham as bringing transport back under public control. In fact, it retains outsourcing. While fares and timetables are coordinated, the system remains a privatisation framework reliant on state subsidy and maintained on the backs of transport workers exploited to the hilt by private operators. The role of Unite and the other unions is to police any industrial struggle to maintain their corporatist relations with the private operators and Labour authority

As the WSWS outlined: “TfGM workers face the necessity of coordinating their struggles against the offensive of the private firms running the Bee Network and demanding ever-greater profits. In this fight they confront not only Burnham, a representative of the ruling Labour Party who opposes strikes and insists that Greater Manchester and the country are “not awash with money,” but also the union bureaucracy, whose control over disputes leads only to their curtailment, sabotage, and eventual sellout. Unity among bus and tram workers across depots and companies can only be forged through the formation of rank-and-file committees, acting independently of the unions’ bureaucratic apparatus and championing workers’ conditions, safety and dignity.”



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