

Unite calls off Greater Manchester tram drivers' strike against fatigue to push through shoddy agreement

Our reporters
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Unite's leadership has pushed through another sellout deal on Greater Manchester transport at the Metrolink tram and light rail system. Metrolink's 320 tram drivers were set to strike on December 19, 20 and New Year's Eve in a dispute over fatigue due to exhausting shift patterns and insufficient breaks. This was averted by a last-ditch deal between Unite officials and the employer, private consortium KeolisAmey.

Tram drivers would have joined the latest round of strike action by 200 of their colleagues in Unite who work in bus services in roles including ticketing and passenger assistance. They are resisting Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM)'s below-inflation pay deal of just 3.2 percent for this year, holding walkouts on December 13, 19 and 20.

TfGM is the transport authority overseen by Labour's Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham. Through the Bee Network, he presides over a system of outsourcing to private operators, including KeolisAmey.

Unite's December 17 press release announcing acceptance of the deal in a ballot of members was the customary smoke and mirrors used after ending every dispute, with general secretary Sharon Graham declaring yet another of her famous "wins".

The changes are thin gruel: reducing driving time without a break from five and a half to five hours; the removal of six day working and the introduction of an additional two rest days, and duty times to be reduced from nine-and-a-half to nine hours. Even these measures, described by Unite as a "commitment" from the employer, will only be implemented in full by January 2027!

Graham's local enforcer, Unite Regional Officer Colin Hayden, claimed Metrolink "came up with a plan that will go a long way to finally solving the issue and keep

workers and passengers safe."

TfGM Chief network officer for TfGM Danny Vaughan told the *Manchester Evening News*, "We've worked very hard with the tram operators and Unite... and are pleased that the offer put forward has been accepted."

This reveals the high-level collusion between Unite officials, the employer and the Labour authority to spike the strike. An estimated 9 million people are set to visit Manchester during the holiday season. The Christmas walkout would have heavily impacted businesses on the busiest days of the year for hospitality and retail and provided maximum leverage for tram drivers to assert their demands. Drivers had warned that unless improvements were made immediately it was not a case of "if", but "when" a major accident would happen.

A *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporting team spoke with tram drivers at the city's two depots. A driver from Queen's Road said, "Nothing has changed, new starters got a pay rise, but the strike wasn't about pay."

At the depot in Trafford Bar, a driver said, "The deal shouldn't have got through. It [the ballot to accept or reject] was a Brexit vote. In an 80 percent turnout, 56 percent voted for and 44 percent against. They [the union and company] targeted the 10 percent, the young drivers with a pay rise."

The pay rise for new drivers, aimed at fixing retention issues among burned-out workers, will lift salaries from £26,420 to £33,026, then to £33,682. The pay of drivers with two years' service increased more modestly, from £31,863 to £34,500 from January 1.

Addressing the staff shortages, the driver continued, "The issues about recruitment and retention, that's been going on for years. It's a chicken and egg situation, isn't it? If the conditions were right, they'd get the drivers."

Their colleague agreed, saying, "It [the dispute] was

never about money but fatigue. It was a way of swinging the vote”.

“We work six days with two days off. It’s not like a nine-to-five job. There’s no set shift pattern—you can start at half four in the morning, or seven or eight, with a half-hour break.

“You’re looking at signals all the time, constantly, you can’t take your eyes off for a minute, you have to have tunnel vision.”

Another comment from a driver: “Nothing changes until March and the bulk of the changes won’t be introduced until January 27.”

“This is the worst that I’ve ever known it,” he continued. “I’ve a background as an HGV [heavy goods vehicle] driver, I know the law. In terms of concentration, driving a [Metrolink] tram is not on the same planet. It’s like doing an A’ level [exam] for eight hours, sixteen hours.

“And all the speed restrictions we have to observe are not factored into our break times.”

Summing up the response of all the drivers who spoke to the WSWS, one said of the deal,

“Keolis is the worst company I’ve worked for. They’ve known about this [fatigue] since October 24. They need to look after their drivers; we’re the ones who make them money. After the ballot, I’ve left the union.”

Unite officials had already suspended strike action between December 5-7, to put proposals which promised new rosters with additional rest days—but in two years’ time. This was rejected emphatically by members. Hayden had described the insulting offer as offering “potential improvements and solutions” and only afterwards said it was “jam tomorrow”.

The WSWS issued an upfront warning:

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, both new entrants and senior, cannot not allow Unite officials to sow divisions based on their shoddy deal, which has jettisoned the safety of every worker. This makes it more critical to develop a rank-and-file committee: uniting drivers against the collusion of Unite with the employer, and for a defence of public safety and a fight to end exhausting working conditions.

Tram drivers can use the platform provided by a committee to reach out to all transport workers, including the 2,000 bus drivers at Stagecoach, Metrolink and First Bus betrayed by Unite officials whose strike action was ended in November after closed-door talks with employers instigated by Burnham.

First Bus drivers’ 20 percent two-year deal left them behind on parity with other Greater Manchester bus drivers; the 12 percent two-year deal at Stagecoach and Metrolink barely dented inflation. Bus drivers’ own demands to tackle fatigue were also swept under the carpet by the union bureaucracy.

The struggle in Manchester can be expanded to the 200 Unite members and 400 Unison members battling the below inflation pay deal of 3.2 percent for route planners, engineers, IT, administrative and customer service staff on the bus and tram network. Their staggered action since October is being led down a dead end, while the sellout deals against bus and tram drivers strengthen the hand of TfGM and Burnham.

The decisive issue is for likeminded workers to begin organising an industrial and political struggle against Unite and Unison’s collusion with the Labour-controlled transport authority and its outsourcing regime—designed to guarantee the profits of the private operators and impose austerity. A rank-and-file committee is needed to begin that fightback.



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