

# East London bus drivers opposing fatigue face strike breaking by Stagecoach

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More than three hundred bus driver members of Unite at Stagecoach's Bow garage in east London took strike action between March 19–22 against intolerable working conditions causing fatigue. Inadequate rest breaks and punishing rosters are ruining their health and risking passenger safety, with exhaustion behind the wheel threatening a fatal incident.

Workers on the picket line were immediately confronted with a concerted strike-breaking operation mounted by the company.

More than a dozen workers assembled on the picket line holding placards demanding “No more long shifts,” drawing support from passing workers including drivers of other bus companies. One young worker passing the garage remonstrated with the driver of a scab bus as it departed.

## Safety sacrificed for profit

As one driver told WSWs reporters, “it’s all about fatigue and health and safety for members of the public.”

Another added, “Normally strikes are about pay. This is your health and safety. We’re just getting so tired with the long shifts that we do.”

Describing a regime of monitoring, bullying and overwork, one explained:

“On a regular basis, we’re given long schedules and told we must be at a specific place at a specific time. If we don’t make it, then very rarely we get turned or told to terminate the bus. Imagine you’re driving a bus from point A to point B and you’re busting for a toilet. Then you get a controller saying why are you taking so long to go to the toilet. At the end of the day, we’re human beings.”

He continued:

“Big brother is watching us on an MDT called IBUS where they monitor your system, they track where you are at all times and they monitor everything you’re doing on the

road.”

As well as the indignity and discomfort, being unable to take toilet breaks was leading to long term health complaints: “People develop kidney problems from the stress of holding it in all day.”

Another driver explained:

“We’re not physically tired, we’re mentally tired. We’ve got all sorts of things to look out for—passengers, pedestrians, other traffic, cyclists, all sorts of things—and we just get mentally tired. People are falling asleep at the wheel. You hear about bus accidents every day. The majority of them, they won’t tell you this, but the driver is so tired he falls asleep.”

Workers described unsafe vehicles and neglect. They referred to “loads of near misses,” buses “running into buildings because of lack of sleep.”

The intolerable conditions were linked to the drive for profit:

“If they shorten the jobs, that means that they’ve got to add extra duties on the road, which means extra buses on the road and they have got to employ more drivers. If they can squeeze more out of you, that’s better for them. It’s money. At the end of the day, they’re just looking at their pockets. They’re not looking at what we’re going through. If we fall asleep and kill somebody, they just replace us with somebody else the next day. And I end up in prison.”

A major trigger for the dispute was the imposition of new rotas before Christmas:

“They keep changing the goalposts and then they did it before Christmas with a new rota coming and we said no more, enough is enough, and that’s when we started fighting back.

“We used to get two weekends every five weeks and now it’s one every five weeks. We have got families, we’ve got young children. We want to spend time with them. The kids don’t see us, they don’t even know who daddy is.”

Another said:

“What about the four rounders that they get us to do on the weekends? And they were looking to introduce it even more

on a Friday and a Saturday and a Sunday... from a set of just four rounders one day or two days, they make you take twelve rounders in the space of three days. Imagine how tired you're going to be by the end of the day."

Entitled leave is routinely denied:

"The union agreement is if we give them three days' notice for a lieu day, they should honour it, but they don't. They allocate it here and there. I might need a day off because I'm too tired, or for my hospital appointment, or my kid's school. That's what my lieu days are for. I call them family days."

One picket summed up the immediate demands:

"We want shorter duties, less rounders, no more four rounders. We want to be allowed to take lieu days when we want and how we want." They demanded proper rest and an end to unpaid time: "Over a ten hour shift they give us forty minutes break... You could do a 12-hour shift but only get paid for nine and a half hours."

## The way forward for Bow drivers

Drivers said the company brought in scab labour from Manchester and Newcastle, billeting them in hotels to train on routes in advance of the strike. This shows the urgent need to break the isolation imposed by Unite, which presents the dispute as confined to a single garage and due to an isolated case of mismanagement.

Bow is a testing ground for a wider attack across Stagecoach London, which operates 9 garages and is using strike-breaking operations that Unite officials refuse to oppose.

Drivers recognise they face not only confronting a fight against Stagecoach but London Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan. One said, "His dad used to be a bus driver... that's how he got in. But no, he went against us."

They supported linking up their struggle with 1,800 London Underground drivers, who were set to begin rolling stoppages next week against the imposition of a compressed four-day working week, increasing shift lengths. However, strike action was suspended by the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union leader Eddie Dempsey for closed-door talks.

The linking up of strike action will not be undertaken by Unite or RMT leaders. Khan, in charge of Transport for London, acts as the local enforcer of the Starmer government. The mayor presides over a regulated tendering of the bus network to private operators to lower costs. Austerity measures have eliminated around 2,000 jobs on

London Underground, intensified workloads and left stations dangerously understaffed to generate a £166 million surplus. The collusion of the union bureaucracy ensures this.

Unite officials struck a blow against Bow drivers and strengthened the company's hand by calling off strike action by 450 drivers at Lea Interchange Bus Company — a Stagecoach subsidiary — just a few miles up the road. This was scheduled to coincide with their walkout over the same four-day period.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham declared a "win" based on a three-year deal offering just 4 percent this year, with the following years uplifts tied to CPI—below real inflation—abandoning the previously stated RPI benchmark.

The dispute at Lea was not restricted to pay, drivers had struck in January against the victimisation of union reps and management bullying. A Unite spokesperson confirmed that the deal only concerned wages, that victimisation is still ongoing, but no further action was planned.

The company is not treating Bow as a local dispute and aims to inflict a defeat which it will use against workers company wide. Workers must respond in kind.

By establishing a rank-and-file committee Bow drivers can make an appeal for unified action against Stagecoach. This should be linked to drivers drawing up their own demands which are non-negotiable: safe and enforceable scheduling limits, guaranteed fully paid rest and recuperation time, the honouring of leave, an end to unpaid spread-over hours, fully staffed depots, and safely maintained vehicles. These demands must be raised across all garages, independently of the union bureaucracy, alongside the fight to take London's transport system out of private ownership and place it under democratic workers' control so that safety, conditions and public need, not profit, determine how the system is run.



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