

Arriva North London bus drivers restart strikes demanding safety improvements against extreme heat

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Around 1,500 bus drivers at Arriva North London have restarted strikes this week across eight garages, demanding immediate action from the company to install air conditioning in their cabs against extreme heat.

The latest strike action started on Tuesday and ends Friday morning, after drivers voted to reject a company offer put by the Unite union last week. The majority of Arriva's fleet of buses is fitted with an inferior air-cooling system which reduces cab temperatures by just 2 or 3 degrees.

Bus drivers have shared pictures of 45°C temperatures inside their cabs this summer, risking their health, safety and lives. A loss of concentration or collapse behind the wheel from extreme heat is also a threat to passengers, pedestrians and other road users.

Drivers' determination to win immediate safety improvements was underscored by the original 96 percent vote for strike action, with 15 stoppages planned until October. But Unite officials abruptly cancelled drivers' strikes after just two days of stoppages on August 14 and 18, agreeing to ballot members on a substandard offer tabled by Arriva North London. Action was "paused" between August 19 and 21.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported from the picket line, bus drivers were angered by the anti-democratic conduct of Unite officials who instructed members to return to work without first being given the opportunity to scrutinise the deal. Many drivers complained they had seen no details of the offer.

Only after the company's offer was rejected by drivers did Unite offer any public criticism. Its press release lamely commented that Arriva's offer did "not go far enough to solve the problems of hot weather working."

Unite's refusal to provide concrete information about the company's offer and its suppression of the vote tally

were part of efforts by officials to stifle drivers' opposition. According to one source, the company's offer was to install air conditioning before the summer of 2027, with no fixed date, a manoeuvre rejected by 587 members, with 501 in favour.

Socialist Worker (published by the Socialist Workers Party) described Arriva workers as having rejected the "bosses' offer", while offering no criticism of Unite officials' underhand methods in calling off strike action and balloting an offer cooked up in private with the company, with zero oversight by members.

Unite officials' bureaucratic playbook

In rejecting the company offer, bus drivers are not only confronting Arriva but the Unite hierarchy.

Unite is operating off a playbook followed by its General Secretary Sharon Graham in hundreds of disputes: sanction strike action by one section of workers, while opposing any effective industry-wide fight; condemn company profiteering, while offering up concessions on workers' key demands; wear down resistance by balloting on derisory offers—all while keeping workers in the dark about the content of proposed agreements.

Unite regional officer Steven Stockwell assured the company this week, "There is still time for Arriva to stop this disruptive action, but it relies on it coming back to the table." This is a blueprint for managing workers' struggles, not fighting them to a successful conclusion.

The fight for safety improvements requires a frontal challenge not only against one company but the entire

privatised bus system. Around 25,000 bus drivers across London face similar conditions on a network carved up and dominated by seven private operators. Yet drivers at just one franchise have been called out.

Across the UK, thousands more drivers have been kept on the job by Unite, despite workers facing heat exhaustion and other life-threatening conditions.

Bus drivers are beginning to recognise Graham's stage-managed strikes as the political theatre they are. As one driver told WSWs, "The problem is universal. But the demonstration is just selective, which is not going to be very effective."

Graham's claim of a non-political return to workplace trade union militancy is a fraud. The containment of the fight at Arriva North London is based on working hand-in-glove with London Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and Transport for London, through which the privatised system continues to guarantee private profits at the expense of workers and the travelling public.

Graham has conducted a PR job for Mayor Khan, hailing his support for Unite's advice that drivers can cite Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act as grounds to refuse to work in extreme temperatures. But this places the onus on individual drivers, leaving them open to management victimisation. It shields profitable companies such as Arriva from the demand to immediately fit air conditioning.

Behind the scenes, *MyLondon* reported, TfL was refusing to relax strict mileage rules, except for a short four-day window between June 24 and 27. For the rest of the heatwave, "companies were told by TfL that drivers were entitled to 20-minute rest breaks, but the operator would face financial penalties for any full trips not completed."

As another bus driver told the WSWs, "This country's leaders are just brain-dead. Why on earth would you allow somebody to take away public transport from you? These people are mad! Why on earth would you privatise the water? ... You can't live without water! And every party supports that: Conservatives and Labour, Lib Dems. No one is saying, 'no, stop this privatisation.'"

The trade union bureaucracy has collectively maintained a situation in which the UK does not have an existing maximum working temperature. Another summer has passed with the clear impact of global warming made painfully evident.

The Trades Union Congress has done nothing to mobilise its 6.6 million members across 47 affiliated unions, instead continuing the political fraud of lobbying

the Labour government to set a legal maximum of 30°C. Meanwhile, extreme heat worsens and workers are left defenceless.

The way forward

The greatest threat to Arriva North London bus drivers is Unite's isolation and wearing down of their struggle. The narrowness of the rejection vote points to the urgent need for a new path of struggle.

Arriva North London drivers have mandated rolling strike action until October. They must take command of their own struggle and demand direct oversight over all further negotiations. The right to scrutinise any further deal before strike action is suspended must be enforced from below. This basic principle of rank-and-file democracy must be restored. Any agreement must be based on workers' needs, not what corporate executives and union bureaucrats deem "acceptable."

Arriva North London bus drivers should establish a rank-and-file committee to set down their non-negotiable demands and issue an appeal to bus and transport workers everywhere who are facing the same routine safety violations and work exhaustion. A collective struggle must be mounted based on the principle: "Workers' lives matter, not corporate profits."

As the WSWs outlined at the start of the dispute: "The fight at Arriva must be expanded across London. While the unprecedented Europe-wide heatwave threatens tens of millions of essential workers, corporate giants such as Arriva and the fossil fuel companies are raking in record profits.

"The claims by the operators that they have 'no money' to refit buses must be rejected. If the bus companies cannot operate a safe service for drivers and passengers, they must be expropriated and their profits used to provide a safe working environment, free from management harassment and with increased pay and benefits for all transport workers."



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