

Arriva London South pay dispute: fact vs fiction

Laura Tiernan
20 April 2022

An article last week on the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed Unite's efforts to ram through a below-inflation pay cut against bus drivers at Arriva London South. It has been publicly attacked by defenders of the union.

The article, "Activists" promote Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham in Arriva London South pay dispute, met with an outpouring of vitriol by a small group of union "activists" after they were challenged by drivers to respond on social media.

Our article quoted Unite's "pay talks update" posted at Brixton garage on April 7, which stated the union's offer was "a lump sum of £750 added on top of the backdated 3 percent". Unite's update explained, "The company said they would go away and seek permission for this and get back to us."

WSWS wrote, "Behind workers' backs, Unite was offering a wage deal that was rejected by drivers across Arriva South in a ballot on March 25."

Like Arriva's earlier 1.5 percent offer, drivers had rejected 3 percent because it was below inflation.

With Brixton being re-balloted for strike action, the only purpose served by Unite's update was to demobilise drivers and tamp down their determination to win an above-inflation pay increase.

In the week preceding our article, drivers' anger had erupted against Unite's attempted sabotage of the pay fight at Arriva, with threats of resignation from the union. On April 6, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee held a meeting of Arriva drivers to discuss the way forward.

The union "activists" responded by claiming the problem was simply a few bad apples, namely regional officials John Murphy and Peter Kavanagh. Sharon Graham, they claimed, was stepping in to put her own officials in charge of pay talks and was busy "reforming" the union. Unite's resurrected 3 percent offer, exposed by WSWS, was a devastating blow to such claims.

In response, the union "activists" unleashed a torrent of abuse against WSWS on a WhatsApp group for Arriva South drivers. They denounced the WSWS as liars and

saboteurs who were splitting workers' unity. In two hours, just five individuals posted 76 denunciations of the WSWS.

Their barrage aimed to create maximum confusion. It was accompanied by demands from Kevin Mustafa and others that this author be removed from the group.

When challenged to explain how WSWS's article was inaccurate, Unite rep from Wood Green Peter Skinner stepped forward. He claimed it was a "lie", "tosh", "rubbish", a "fairy tale" and "disingenuous" to cite December's 12-month CPI inflation rate of 5.4 percent. WSWS should have cited the lower inflation rate of 2.9 percent from April 2021, when last year's pay round began.

This is nonsense. April's postponed pay talks resumed in October 2021, with inflation rising month-on-month. Unite's 1.5 percent and 3 percent claims were both well below inflation, which as WSWS pointed out had reached 5.4 percent by December.

Skinner has sought to create maximum confusion over what constitutes the pay period, claiming it was "misleading" to cite any inflation figure beyond April 2021. The facts speak for themselves. Arriva's November 4 letter to Unite confirms that the pay period opened in April 2021 and that "the next pay review anniversary date will be 1st April 2022."

Drivers have unambiguously opposed Unite's 3 percent offer. An online poll of drivers at Brixton garage asked, "What percentage should the reps take to the company?" Of the two options listed, 23 percent of drivers selected 4 percent, while 77 percent of drivers selected a 5 percent pay increase. The logo for the Arriva South drivers' WhatsApp group is "5%".

This supports the WSWS article, which opposed Unite's attempt to overrule the will of its own membership.

Unite's pay claim should be far higher. The 2021 pay round ended in March 2022, and by then CPI inflation had risen by 7 percent over the previous 12 months. By Unite's own preferred inflation measure, RPI (which includes housing costs), inflation was 9 percent by March. Yet Unite has gone behind workers' backs to resubmit a 3 percent

claim with a lump-sum “sweetener” of £750—an insulting £14 a week for drivers who have risked their lives during the pandemic.

This year’s pay award will also be delayed—a conscious strategy by Arriva and Unite.

Skinner’s attack on the WSWS is also aimed against drivers. Its purpose is to politically intimidate all those looking for a way to fight Unite’s sell-outs. His arrogance toward drivers was evidenced in his accusation that WSWS was exaggerating the hardships they face, declaring that “no-one is ‘forced’ to do overtime”.

Incriminated by his own words, Skinner felt the need to add, “I’d personally never recommend any deal for London bus drivers as nothing we could be offered would be good enough” and later, “if they doubled our pay you still deserve more for the hard, stressful job that drivers do.”

In principle, Skinner believes that no pay increase is too great. In practice, he insists drivers must accept whatever Sharon Graham dishes out after back room talks with Arriva.

Skinner is the genuine voice of the trade union bureaucracy, quick to defend its privileges against any threat from below. The fact he is a lower ranking rep makes him more aware of the anger building among drivers that threatens to break free from the entire rotten edifice of collusion and betrayal.

Skinner and his colleagues are not “activists” but de-activists. As far as they are concerned, you can complain and criticise all you like, but you must not break the grip of these pro-company syndicates. Their arguments are mounted against a developing rank-and-file rebellion, counselling workers to be patient and trust Sharon Graham and her “generals”.

There is an additional element to their tirade against the WSWS. This author was invited onto the WhatsApp group by drivers who appreciate WSWS and respect its record in exposing Unite’s collaboration with the bus companies, Transport for London and Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

The growing authority of WSWS is viewed as a significant threat by Unite’s defenders. Their response appealed to political narrowness, insisting the article’s author was not a bus driver and didn’t “walk in our shoes”. They resorted to anti-socialist redbaiting. “Your ultraleft opinions don’t resonate with London bus drivers”, Skinner declared, denouncing WSWS as “a far-left group that want workers to take over the world”.

If WSWS was not “resonating” then why waste so much energy attacking it? WSWS is read by thousands of drivers and its influence is growing because it speaks the truth, and the socialist programme it champions meets the needs of the working class.

It is critical that drivers speak out and oppose the

unprincipled efforts to silence the WSWS. Political censorship sets a dangerous precedent. It is a direct attack on drivers’ right to know information being suppressed by the mainstream media, the bus companies and Unite the union. It is aimed at blocking a politically conscious fightback by the working class.

Unite’s role in dividing workers, suppressing strikes and enforcing pay cuts is not the outcome of a few bad leaders. The bankruptcy of the trade unions is rooted in their defence of capitalism. The new organisations needed by the working class must be organisationally and politically independent from the pro-company trade unions. But the fight for the political independence of the working class is the struggle for socialism and must be international.

Workers at Arriva London South are pitched against a giant global corporation, Deutsche Bahn Group. Success in that fight depends not only on the unification of workers across London, but across DB Group’s operations globally. The same is true for every struggle facing the working class.

The fight for a rank-and-file committee at Arriva London South is one element in a broader struggle that faces the entire international working class. The problems facing transport workers, including spiralling inflation and historic cuts across Transport for London, are the outcome of the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee invites drivers to attend its meeting tonight at 7pm to discuss the Arriva South pay dispute. The meeting is open to all London bus, underground, rail and DLR workers. It will establish the political basis for a united fight by transport workers for an inflation-busting pay increase and to push back the class war offensive of the Johnson government and its backers in the Labour Party and corporatist trade unions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact