

# UK: End Unite's isolation of the Go North East bus dispute to defeat strikebreaking operation

Tony Robson  
23 November 2023

The strike by 1,300 bus drivers and depot staff at Go North East (GNE) is entering its fourth week, posing vital questions over how to take the fight forward at the local division of the transport giant, Go Ahead.

An escalation to all-out strike action began on October 28 following two earlier one-week stoppages and after a last-minute revised offer of 10.3 percent and an above inflation pay rise for next year was rejected.

The fight by GNE bus workers expresses pent-up opposition to five years without a real terms wage increase and demands for parity pay. The end of October pay offer still left GNE workers behind their counterparts at other Go Ahead bus operations, bringing the hourly rate for drivers from £12.83 to £14.15, compared to those at Go North West (GNW) on £15.53 an hour. Go-Ahead rakes in £84 million a year from its bus operations.

GNE has been unable to run most services as a result of the action by members of Unite at its six garages in the north-east of England—Consett, Gateshead, Hexham, Percy Main, Sunderland and Washington.

From November 14, the company has been operating a “skeleton service” by drafting in managers and office staff with bus driving licenses. This strikebreaking operation is being assisted by private operator City Transport Group, which usually provides rail replacement services.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has downplayed this aggressive move by the company to impose its dictates. In a press release on November 13, she described the strikebreaking by GNE as “playing games.”

This is to justify the continued isolation of the dispute, with Unite not mobilising solidarity action

among its thousands of union members across the bus sector in the UK to shut down GNE. In contrast, GNE has stated it has the full backing of Go Ahead, which clearly views the dispute as the spearhead of an attack on all bus workers.

Graham's call for a “reasonable new offer” shows that the union leadership are not serious about the demand for parity. Any further crumbs from GNE would be used to suspend the action for a re-ballot, a method used to grind down opposition and sell out numerous strikes at Stagecoach, Arriva and Abellio where core demands were shelved.

Unite avoids any direct reference to an actual pay demand at GNE in its press releases. The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) requested clarity from Unite but received no response. The figure cited in the media is 13.2 percent for one year. This is nowhere near the 20 percent required for parity between GNE and GNW.

When it comes to denouncing corporate “greed”, Graham speaks out of both sides of her mouth. While stating that the company is “awash with money” the union's proposals for a financial settlement in failed talks were couched in terms assuring GNE that its profits would be completely spared. A Unite press release explained its proposals amounted to a mere £238,000 which Graham described as “down the back of a sofa” money for Go Ahead.

GNE has taken Unite's “reasonable” approach as proof the union bureaucracy can be relied on to contain and grind down the opposition for the workforce.

The rank-and-file must now draw up their own red lines for the dispute and demand oversight of all further negotiations, rather than closed-door meetings of the

company and Unite officials. They must reach out to other bus workers to develop a unified counteroffensive against the restrictions imposed by Unite from above.

This would find widespread support, but it requires challenging the line of both Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union that bus workers are engaged in unrelated pay battles that can be resolved at a local level, rather than through a combined fight against multi-million-pound companies.

Just this week, Unite and the RMT have called off planned strike action to ballot over revised offers at two other major bus companies. Over 1,200 bus drivers and members of Unite at First Glasgow were due to strike for a week from November 24. Around 200 bus drivers and members of the RMT at Stagecoach East Midlands were scheduled to walk out in 48-hour strikes on November 27/28 and December 4/5, 11/12 and 18/9.

If the union bureaucracy is unable to sabotage action outright it limits stoppages and leaves them isolated such as at London Transit (owned by RATP). More than 350 bus drivers and engineers who are members of Unite have taken two days of strike action on November 10 and 12 as part of six days of rolling action to the end of December.

Unifying struggles over pay and against attacks on terms and conditions means rejecting the claim by Unite that common ground can be found between workers and the employers. Victory demands the rolling back of the profit drive and grip of the private operators.

Graham, speaking at the Unite rally on November 10 outside the GNE bus depot in Gateshead, tried to dress up a pro-corporate orientation behind militant bluster by pledging to “escalate this dispute” and not allow the company to “break you as workers.” What this in fact meant was making appeals to the corporate boardroom and shareholders, the content of Unite’s “leverage” campaigns.

Stating that she would “personally” be involved in the dispute from now on, Graham said her first action would be to sit down with the Go Ahead chief executive to request that Nigel Featham, Managing Director of GNE and GNW, be removed from further negotiations—i.e., letting her work more closely with the top echelon in the company.

The second immediate action was to organise a meeting with a Canadian union to apply pressure on the

company. This was not a plan for workers’ solidarity action but to leverage the Ontario Public Service Employees Union’s role as the largest investor in Go Ahead through their pension fund! A delegation from Unite travelled to Toronto to meet with Ontario Public Service Employees Union representatives. Unite Regional Co-ordinator Suzanne Reid said, “It’s about time we push forward this dispute internationally”.

This is premised on the lie that such “leverage” methods at Go North West secured a “win” against Go Ahead in 2021 in the fight against fire and rehire. In truth, the PR exercise organised by Unite to supposedly shame the company was used to maintain the isolation of the 11-week strike by 400 drivers at the Queens Road depot in Manchester. The fire-and-rehire contracts were only withdrawn in return for an agreement by Unite to implement £1 million of cuts. The union bureaucracy got its feet back under the table, while bus workers were hung out to dry. The contract included a year-long pay freeze, job losses, reduced sick pay and meal breaks, and compulsory overtime.

This bitter experience underlines the need for rank-and-file bus workers to open up their own lines of communication, so that lessons can be drawn and a unified strategy developed against the divide-and-conquer policy of Unite.

The allies of GNE workers are not in the boardroom of the Go Ahead Group or its shareholders, but among the 25,000 workers employed by the bus and rail transnational across seven countries, whose joint exploitation accounts for its £3.2 billion annual revenues and its profits. This is the real leverage which must be mobilised in a fight across national borders in opposition to the pro-company apparatus headed by Graham.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**