

Manchester Go North West bus drivers vote overwhelmingly to strike

By Dennis Moore and Robert Stevens
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Bus drivers employed by Go North West, based at the Queens Road depot in Manchester, have voted by 94 percent for industrial action following a “consultative ballot.” The drivers are opposing moves by Go North West to attack their pay, terms, and conditions.

Go North West is part of the multi-billion pound Go Ahead group. It intends to fire the whole workforce of 477 workers and then rehire them, forcing them to accept inferior job contracts including an increase in hours worked that will be unpaid, and slashing sick pay arrangements.

Go North West have offered a one-off payment of £5,000 to compensate for a cut in drivers pay by an average of £ 3,500 a year. Last year, Go North West purchased the Queens Road depot from another bus company, First Manchester, along with its fleet of 163 buses.

Local newspaper, the *Oldham Chronicle*, reported last month that “Go North West managing director, Nigel Featham says many of the working practices inherited at Queens Road when they took over the depot last year have been in use since the 1980s.” Commenting prior to the strike vote on existing working practises, Featham said, “There are some real throwbacks in there and while individually these may seem harmless, together they add up to a huge waste of resource each year.” He added, “For us it’s a simple choice between continuing to sustain annual losses or improving our performance to a point where we eventually return the business back into profit.”

The Go Ahead group is one of the biggest bus operators in the UK. It also runs bus and train services internationally, operating in Singapore, Australia, Germany, Norway, and plans to expand operations into Scandinavia. Go Ahead made an operating profit for the year ending June 27 of between £63 million and

£75 million.

The company initially tried to impose the new conditions on the Queens Road depot workers during lockdown when 80 percent of the workforce had been furloughed. Senior managers are accused of bullying and harassment by drivers with complaints being made over homophobia and harassment of a staff member with mental health problems. A Unite trade union representative at the depot who did not agree to the company’s demands has been suspended and faces a disciplinary hearing.

Bus drivers have been forced to take on extra cleaning duties during the pandemic, putting themselves at risk without adequate safety measures in place. As with bus drivers and transport workers throughout the country, such attacks could only be imposed due to the collaboration of the trade unions with management.

The Unite union declared in an August 11 statement that “working practices at the Queens Road depot, Manchester which the company wants to buy-out have since been replaced by additional cleaning and cash collection duties which mean the bus drivers are working just as hard.”

Unite is opposed to industrial action and the mobilisation of its members against the onslaught by Go North West. The “consultative” ballot is a means for the union bureaucracy to delay and frustrate any industrial action and a means in which they justify further collaboration with the corporations on exactly how management’s attacks on the workforce can be implemented. The question Unite put to its members on the ballot was, “Do you wish to proceed to a full industrial action ballot?”

The union made a naked appeal to shareholders at Go Ahead on the basis that management at Go North West

were a liability and were jeopardizing continued profitability! In an August 13 statement, Unite said of Go North West managing director, “We believe that Nigel Featham’s ‘bull in a china shop’ actions are now the *biggest threat to the business and its profitability.*”

Just prior to the strike vote being announced, General Secretary of Unite, Len McCluskey, wrote on September 9 to CEO David Brown that the union was launching an “international campaign” over the dispute. He was clear that this had nothing to do with uniting drivers in Manchester with those in Go Ahead’s workforce in the rest of the UK and globally. Instead he threatened to expose “your company’s behaviour to all of your stakeholders, partners and associates, including our significant political network in the Nordic countries, Germany and Australasia.”

The main demand to management at Go North West was for renewed collaboration. Unite executive officer, Sharon Graham, said, “Go North West’s managing director Nigel Featham has put the company on course for an unnecessary conflict. His actions could lead to lasting damage to the reputation of Go Ahead both throughout this country and overseas. Our message to the company is fair and simple—drop the disciplinary action against our union representative, drop your ‘fire & rehire’ threat and get around the negotiating table.”

Drivers everywhere have seen a worsening of their conditions, with an increased risk of being infected by COVID-19 and the lack of basic health and safety provision. Bus workers in Manchester must look at the pernicious role Unite have played in suppressing the struggle of their brothers and sisters in London, who have been fighting to defend their health, safety and very lives during the pandemic. To date 33 London bus workers have lost their lives due to COVID-19.

Last month, bus workers at Arriva and Metroline garages in London voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action in two consultative ballots. On August 7, drivers at Arriva North and Arriva South voted to strike for a “COVID payment.” The “yes” vote was more than 98 percent, with 1,675 voting in favour. Drivers were angered at having to work longer hours on Sunday rosters throughout the national lockdown, and only receiving lower Monday–Friday pay rates—effectively a huge wage cut for risking their lives as frontline workers. A separate ballot held a few days

later at four Metroline West garages over the introduction of remote sign-on and a range of other health and safety issues received almost total backing among 523 drivers involved. At three garages, Alperton, Greenford and Willesden Junction, the vote was unanimous.

All these votes are being sat on by the union bureaucracy, who intend to do nothing. There have been a number of protests outside the Manchester Queens Road bus depot organised by officials from Manchester Trades Council, Labour’s Momentum group, and supporters of the pseudo-left Counterfire. Some buses have been delayed in leaving the garage and on several occasions the police have been called.

The purpose of these protests is to cover for Unite’s refusal to organise any real fightback.

To take forward the struggle against Go Ahead, bus drivers must organise themselves independently of the trade unions and their backers among the pseudo-left milieu. This demands the building of rank-and-file workers safety committees at every bus depot. These committees must start from the needs of workers and not the best way to keep the company profitable.

Workers in Manchester should emulate the move by London bus drivers at a number of garages who this week set up the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The main resolution passed by the drivers reads, “Independent action is needed because the trade unions work on behalf of the companies and the government in suppressing opposition from below. During the first wave of the pandemic, as COVID-19 was killing drivers, Unite joined with TfL and the bus companies to insist that PPE was ‘not recommended,’ pledging ‘industrial harmony.’ Members who criticised Unite’s actions were suspended from the union.”

The resolution concluded, “We call on fellow bus and transport workers at garages in London and beyond to stand with us in this fight. Help establish a network of rank-and-file committees to take this fight forward.”

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