



Unity!

BETTER QUALITY, CHEAP AND GREEN

The communist case for public ownership of transport

Jez Millen

PRIVATISATION

WHEN THATCHER privatised the buses during the 1980s, we were spun the lie that this meant lower fares, more routes and growing passenger numbers.

Ask any bus user what Tory privatisation of buses means for the midlands and they will tell you that the truth is the opposite of what we were promised. High fares, slashed route networks, less frequent services and too many older polluting buses.

The evidence bears out their experience. Fares in England went up 71% since 2005; we've lost more than 3000 bus routes too. That means people are often left with no choice but to use their car to get to work, school, hospital etc, if they are lucky enough to have one; a much less green form of transport than the bus. If you don't have a car you are limited in what job you can take, how often you can visit loved ones or even whether or not you can get out at all.

Running buses for private profit has

meant the five trans-national corporations who run 70% of our buses have taken handsome profits for themselves, even though tax payers fork out 42% to fund bus service outside London.

For example, West Midlands Travel (National Express Group) reported operating profit of £15m in 2021. Stagecoach reported operating profits of £65.2 in the half year to 29th October 2022. All in all, since privatisation, billions has been lost to the private operators that should have been invested in a cheap, green and frequent bus service.

The only alternative is public ownership and the evidence for the UK bears this out. There are ten public bus operators left: Five in England, two in Scotland, and two in Wales and one in the North of Ireland. They are showing the way to a higher quality, cheaper and greener future for buses.

Council owned Reading Buses' extensive network of frequent bus services has one of the greenest and up to date bus fleets in the country because it invests its revenue in improving the local buses not enriching greedy shareholders. It has won a string of

awards for offering such a good value, green and high quality bus network.

Another council-owned national award winner is Nottingham City Transport. Apart from being the only bus outfit to be voted best operator five times, they were recognised in 2019 as the most environmentally improved. Their achievements include providing a joined-up transport strategy, combined with fair fares, modern buses and frequent, extensive routes that are persuading people out of their cars and onto the buses in droves.

It is worth noting that in the midlands, we have the highest and lowest bus user ship trends outside London, for metropolitan areas in the UK. Publically owned Nottingham has gone from strength to strength and tops the league, whereas private West Midlands buses are the bottom of the pack.

The case against private buses and for public ownership has never been stronger.

JEZ MILLEN, USED TO WORK IN THE BUS INDUSTRY AND HAS A LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO GOOD PUBLIC TRANSPORT.

BUSES FOR PEOPLE NOT FOR PROFIT

Tony Conway

TRANSPORT FOR THE CARLESS

THE MOST important mode of public transport in the Midlands by far is the local bus. Prior to Covid there were 475,000 bus journeys across the region each year. They account for more than two thirds of all public transport journeys and are the environmentally friendly option for local trips. People with no access to private vehicles, including many younger, older or disabled people, and those on low incomes, are completely dependent on good and affordable bus services.

The Communist Party states that the privatisation of public bus companies has been detrimental to the necessary objectives of cheap, environmentally sustainable and accessible transport. The continued subsidies results in shareholder gains and an increased monopolisation of provision. This is nothing more than a further example of state monopoly capital as public money is transferred to the private sector.

Bus provision has declined to the way the market is structured, and services are funded. This can be seen by comparing England outside London with London. From the mid-eighties bus use doubled in Greater London now over half of all bus journeys take place there whilst services outside London have steadily declined.

Whilst we believe that reregulation of bus

services would be step forward it in itself would still leave bus provision in private sector hands, including the workers as well as the manufacturers of buses. Moreover the privatisation has taken away any public accountability.

Bus deregulation over 35 years has been a disaster. Fares have risen faster than inflation or wages with a 60% increase between 2009-19 whilst route mileage and service frequency have shrunk. Passengers are paying more for less.

In the Midlands bus services are provided by private operators with routes that are not commercially viable, but which are deemed socially or economically necessary, funded by local authorities.

We must campaign to alert attention to the drying up of public support otherwise we face bus service cuts and frequency reductions for both commercial and local authority supported services. It is estimated that 20-25 per cent of commercial services are under threat.

Of course, whilst funding could ameliorate the current crisis it does not solve the underlying problem of the lack of a genuine National Bus Strategy.

Such a strategy would address the chaos of the present system.

There are huge gains to be made from publicly owned bus companies. Improvements in training and recruitment of drivers, gains in

procurement as we move towards zero emissions. There is also considerable advantage in the use of smart technology to keep passengers informed of bus timings and timetables and to collect fares. Having a common system for fares and passes would make travel so much easier. The Communist Party believes that publicly owned bus transport should be provided free or fares set as low as possible to encourage use.

Local authorities have a key role in procuring services for their area and must be given a per capita sum to ensure adequate coverage. This will have enormous environmental benefits and a comprehensive well-funded service across England can help keep communities alive and vibrant.

Above all our demand is to have publicly owned bus services, run for the benefit of communities, citizens and workers and are accountable to them. Bus Services must link with rail and must be environmentally sustainable. Our Bus Building Industry must be redeveloped to operate in the public sector.

We call on all to support this campaign. Hold a public meeting - invite a speaker.

Write to your MP and Council. Raise it with your trade union. Write to your local newspaper.

TONY CONWAY IS A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

BUSES

Wash

BRIEF OVERVIEW

MORE PEOPLE use buses than trains but rarely ever in news. Even the National Express March strike in the West Midlands was rarely in National Media.

Buses are used by local people to go to work, school, shop and socialise. Particularly important to older people, students, disabled and those unable to afford a car. Throughout the day buses are used by many generations of passengers.

Where buses are scarce people become isolated and this can have a detrimental impact on health. Many of these bus passengers do not have a collective voice.

In Europe Public Control is the norm but in the UK aggressive deregulation is our legacy. This allows Bus Operators to set own fares, routes, standards and workforce terms and conditions.

Deregulation was supposed to aid competition but in reality a few companies run most of the services, so no real on street competition.

Until the pandemic bus operators cherry picked the most popular routes getting as much profit as possible. Some rising fares above the then inflation. This left local authorities to pay for quieter but essential and off-peak services.

Since the pandemic and huge sums to support services the only gainers seem to be Bus Company shareholders as routes are cut and drivers jobs lost in some areas.

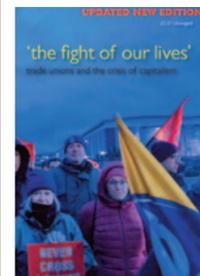
Trade Unions have called for Bus Services to be brought back into public (municipal) ownership. It is important bus workers are aware and involved in any campaign where possible.

The 2017 Bus Act ties the hands of most Local Authorities. Also the provision of buses varies from place to place even only a few miles apart. Campaigns must fit local circumstances. Remunicipalisation of local bus services is the goal but legislation hampers this. The Left and others must campaign to scrap the 2017 bus act and see it replaced with legislation that favours public services.

In areas with an elected Mayor the act does allow a franchising model, should the Mayor choose to go down this route. This would allow local politicians to have a say over routes and fares as in London. But our real aim must be public ownership with real democratic control involving bus users.

Our final plea must be to bring in to our campaign bus users into our campaign. This isn't easy but bus users know the value of good bus services.

WASH IS A BIRMINGHAM COMMUNIST ACTIVE IN THE PENSIONERS MOVEMENT



▲ 'the fight of our lives' Trade unions and the crisis of capitalism is the Communist Party's latest pamphlet written by a team of trade union activists and academics it offer an analysis of the system's crisis and the way forward for the working class and trade unions. £2 or £1 unemployed.



Morning Star

Daily paper of the left

PULLING THE RUG FROM UNDER THE FAR-RIGHT

Sam Dodson
FASCISTS

FASCISTS and conspiracy theorists have infiltrated an Oxford anti-LTN movement.¹ Last February two thousand people marched through Oxford to oppose Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs).²

LTNs close certain residential roads from public cars. The council's aim is to 'create a better liveable environment for residents' [3]. In effect, they create gated communities.

They were introduced on a trial basis in Oxford, Cowley in early 2021 by the then Tory-Lib led county council. In July 2022 they were made permanent by the new Lib-Lab-Green council. That council has since approved additional LTN trials in east Oxford.

The schemes have proved divisive, with residents on adjacent roads complaining of increased traffic⁴ and taxi drivers having to increase their route distance⁵, amongst other complaints. Multiple home-grown protests have taken place since the trials started, supported by affected residents and small-business owners⁶. The backlash to the measures is understandable considering the consistent growth in car use within the county, with a 36% increase in vehicle miles driven in Oxfordshire since 1993⁷. The flip side to this is a drop in public transport use, with Oxfordshire bus patronage falling since 2013⁸.

The council aims to improve their bus services as a part of their 2022 Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP), which has the commendable goal of 'deliver[ing] a net-zero Oxfordshire transport and travel system' by 2040. But, having entered into an 'Enhanced Partnership Plan' with the bus monopolies to carry out the improvements, their policies end up benefiting the bus companies at the expense of the people!⁹

For example, the 2022 Central Oxfordshire Travel Plan (COTP), which is guided by the LTCP, aims to enhance public transport in Oxford by implementing punitive traffic reduction measures to improve bus productivity by 10%¹⁰. These include traffic filter trials, which limit private car access along certain bus routes.

Predictably, opposition to the filters has mounted, with a 'go-fundme' page – backed by a coalition of Oxford-based business owners – having raised over £50,000 to mount a legal challenge against the council¹¹.

To counter fascist co-optation of this issue, we should put the question of public ownership of the bus operators on the agenda. Simultaneously, avenues towards franchising of services should be explored. This could form one plank of a progressive set of demands aimed at uniting a wider popular movement, targeting both local and national government.

Notes

- 1 <https://tinyurl.com/yvjmdzz5>
- 2 <https://tinyurl.com/4nm39v9t>
- 3 Oxford Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan 2020.
- 4 'Residents on peripheral roads of Cowley LTN say traffic has increased'
- 5 'Oxford taxi drivers say LTN has increased journey time and prices'
- 6 <https://tinyurl.com/yc6xyav8>
- 7 <https://tinyurl.com/yfudut6r>
- 8 <https://tinyurl.com/fkpz39a2>
- 9 Oxfordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan 2022 Pg 3. Go-Ahead and Stagecoach control 80% of the bus operating market in Oxfordshire.]
- 10 Oxfordshire Enhanced Partnership Plan & Scheme 2023 Pg. 30]
- 11 <https://tinyurl.com/3c6pjaay>

SAM DODSON IS A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S OXFORDSHIRE & BERKSHIRE COMMITTEE

THATCHER, BUSES AND ME

Nick Matthews
PRIVATISATION

FIRST A BIT of history. Growing up in the Black Country my WMPTE card, as it was then, bought me unheralded freedom. For a modest monthly fee I had free bus and rail travel in what was then an actual West Midlands County which had responsibility for public transport in its area. On its formation in 1969 the West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive acquired the vehicles and other assets of the municipal bus fleets of Birmingham, Walsall, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton. The former Birmingham City Transport was by far the largest part around two thirds of the new 2100-strong fleet with its 8500 workers, and so a modified version of their blue and cream livery was adopted by WMPTE. The ex-Birmingham assets became South Division, with the others forming the Walsall-based North Division. The public named them Wumpty buses. When the creation of the West Midlands County Council expanded the WMPTE's operating area into Coventry, WMPTE absorbed the vehicles and assets of that city's municipal transport undertaking, Coventry Transport, which became its East Division.

Tasked with planning and coordinating bus and rail transport in the Passenger Transport Area, the Executive's activities in its early years were largely confined to integrating the inherited municipal bus operations. Much of the Passenger Transport Area was not served by WMPTE buses, many bus services continued to be run by the Midland Red bus company. WMPTE entered into negotiations to partly buy them out. On 3 December 1973, there was a transfer of assets and services between the Midland Red and the Executive involving routes that operated wholly (or almost wholly) within the proposed West Midlands County. By April 1974, the WMPTE's fleet numbered around 2,600 vehicles. (Interestingly today the successor company National Express West Midlands serving a much bigger population has around 1,600)

It was the freedom of this network my WMPTE pass gave me!

Mrs Thatcher didn't like buses. She was alleged to have said that "a man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure." I was into my thirties by this time. I had learned to drive quite late on and found buses, more convenient and cheaper than owning a car. So was I a failure?

DEREGULATED

What has followed and was never corrected when Labour was last in government was calamitous for buses.

As a result of the Transport Act 1985, bus services were deregulated. This resulted in the transfer of the bus services to a separate legal entity, West Midlands Travel Ltd (WMT), which took over the bus assets and services of the WMPTE on 26 October 1986. WMT remained in public ownership under the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority until 1991, when it was sold to its management and employees. WMT was subsequently purchased by National Express.

I knew bus deregulation had been a disaster in the conurbation, but I did not realise just how bad until I moved out to Warwickshire. In the last ten years the population of the county has risen by 50,000 to 600,000 while bus mileage has fallen by 60%.

Is this because everyone in the county is over 26 and not a failure? A survey last year found the barriers to people using buses. "Common perceived issues with using buses amongst non- and irregular users tended to centre around the reliability and speed of journey times when compared to using the car, the fact that buses aren't available to take people to the places they need to get to at the times they need to travel and a lack of connecting and evening and weekend services and a lack of co-ordination with shift finishing times."

"Facilities at bus stops were generally felt to be in need of improvement from a personal safety, accessibility, information provision and comfort perspective and participants with hidden disabilities and visual impairments, in particular, felt that on-bus facilities were generally poor with issues with bus cleanliness

(dirty windows impacting on a sense of location along the route) and a lack of on-board information (e.g. next stop displays and audio announcements) adding to their anxiety when travelling by bus. There was also some concern raised around crowding on buses in more than one group, particularly in relation to the need to socially distance due to the Covid-19 pandemic."

So far so obvious, then the big question, "The cost of using buses was mainly seen as a barrier for those on lower incomes, including younger people, who often tended to choose to walk for shorter journeys rather than catch the bus for this reason."

In short, the service is poor and expensive, and even when it exists is hard to access or in some places even to find!

This survey was undertaken not to enable the county to improve services but to put a bid into the Government's National Bus Strategy for some dosh for their Bus Services Improvement Plan.

It's worth remembering why that publicly owned and controlled properly regulated service in the West Midlands was such a golden age for bus travel. Of course, no one who uses Warwickshire buses is expecting anything to improve, the truth of the matter is if you are going to have a plan you need the resources and to have something to plan. That planning needs to be spatial to ensure new developments have bus services planned in from the beginning and we need public ownership and control of services.

Not only was Mrs Thatcher wrong about bus services she was wrong about everything. Unfettered markets will not provide most people with the services they need furthermore the climate emergency dictates we need to get people out of cars and the first and easiest way is to get them onto a bus.

Now I am the proud owner of an older person's bus pass. And am obviously a complete failure. That's why I am supporting a new Campaign for Better Bus Services.

NICK MATTHEWS IS ACTIVE IN THE CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT

HOW DO WE GET PEOPLE OUT OF CARS

Let's face it, traffic congestion, as car users know only too well, primarily stems from there being too many cars on the road at any one time. The Communist Party isn't anti-car or car user. Why would we be? We want to see high quality car manufacturing in Britain. The Midlands used to be the centre of motor manufacturing. We need to build a more efficient, environmentally sustainable means of transport. This means looking at Trains, trams and buses, along side cars. Integrating fares and bringing them into a coherent network with single ticketing. It means shifting freight onto rail and even canals. Authorities have tended to go for a stick approach to reduce car journeys. A massive investment in green transport would act as a carrot. In addition, internet arrangements as proposed in the Labour Manifesto of 2019 are now a necessity.

At the 2016 West Midlands Mayoral election the Communist Party Candidate, the late Graham Stevenson, spoke about his immensely popular campaign to expand bus use and control car use. Graham had been head of bus transport for the Transport and General Workers Union and was on record of campaigning for a new tram system, which would have been properly integrated with local buses and

trains and provided a service across the whole county.

In the years since 2016 some tram routes have expanded – not by much. Bus services have been cut in rural areas – forcing people to use their car. Whilst a few new train stations have been opened and a few lines brought back into use, the funding and rip-off model has fleeced the user and tax payer.

We do need to change travel behaviour and that means we need better connectivity and better, information. We need staffed ticket offices in rail and bus stations. A publicly owned sustainable transport system that sees our trains, trams and buses built locally is a priority. We need more Park and Ride services and better parking facilities. We need unionised jobs with well motivated workers with good pay and careers. But at the bottom of all this we must stop subsidising shareholder profits and bring our public transport into public ownership.

We have well over 5 million daily road trips in the West Midlands. Most bus services are on an entirely commercial basis. A massive rise in car use challenges us to ease congestion, manage parking, and get more cleaner, greener and safer with by more walking and cycling

and more use of buses, trains and trams.

Bus operators are subsidy farmers heavily funded by the public purse. By 2015 public financial support for buses accounted for 41% of overall industry costs.

Bus patronage increased in London because there was the political will to do it. The Congestion Charge was the single most important reason there were extra funds for public transport. The second factor was gaining Highway Authority powers to bring in extensive priority measures.

The Establishment parties talk about developing a partnership with bus companies but any kind of partnership is a two-way street.

Never let it be said that the big profits of these private companies is due to paying their staff exorbitant wages!

Do we want to subsidise the dividends of major transnational monopolies. Public money is leaking out to shareholders rather than being reinvested into better standards and lower fares. We need increased investment in highways infrastructure to get better journey times and reliability and improvements on board with better seating, announcements and Wi-Fi.

How do we get people out of their cars?

We need to change travel behaviour by addressing the availability and cost of parking but also by providing good park and ride options.

We need travel planning by business and schools.

One possibility is to get reduced car use in peak periods by enforcing exclusive High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes at pinch points.

But it's the congestion charge that will do it, in carrot and stick combination with other things.

The Communist Party is in favour of public ownership of buses to save money, improve services and end subsidy farming and profiteering.

Private bus companies routinely look for a 13% operating profit margin on its regional bus routes, and that's after their local subsidiaries pay over the odds for internally provided services such as accounting or computers, or human resources.

There are still a dozen municipal bus companies still running across Britain, but they boast some of the best passenger satisfaction ratings in the country.

Publicly owned public transport takes profit out of the system.