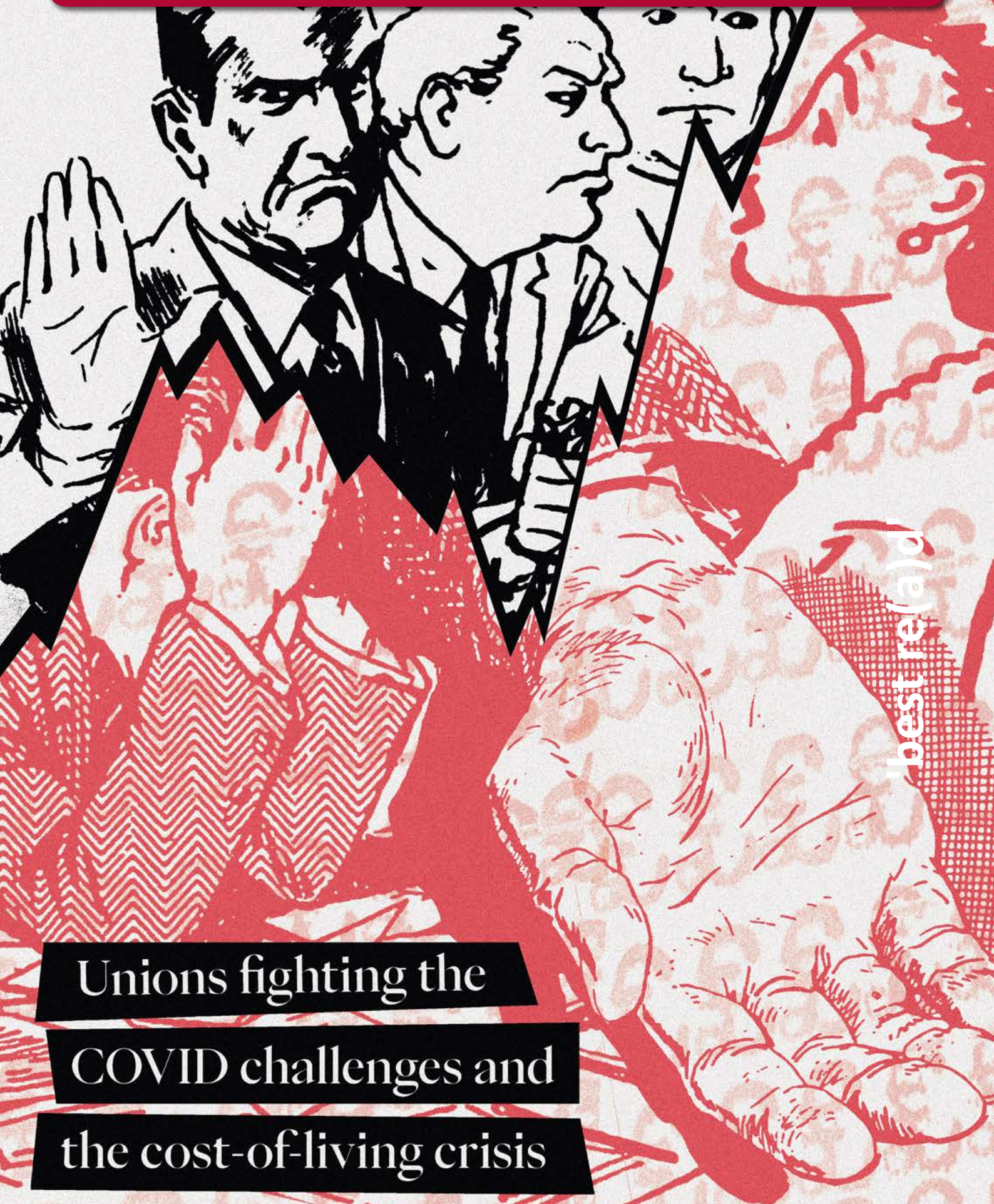


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The battle for our buses – get on board the double-decker for the fight for our future

Ellie Harrison outlines how progress is possible

The forthcoming local elections are set to become the battle for our buses. New powers – which we fought for and won in the *Transport (Scotland) Act 2019* – will become available later this year. These include the power to re-regulate private bus companies for the first time since Thatcher’s disastrous policy of deregulation in 1986. Known as ‘franchising’, this power will enable us to cap fares and plan routes in the public interest so that our bus networks are no longer shaped solely by where companies can make most profit. Then, we have the power to set-up new municipal bus companies capable of providing Scotland’s other regions with the same great service people enjoy on Lothian Buses.

Our task now as campaigners is to put pressure on all political parties to seize these powers following the local elections and to implement them on a regional level. Earlier this year, we worked with the STUC to launch ‘Take Back Our Buses’ campaigns in three of Scotland’s biggest City Regions: Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee. There was obviously no need for a campaign in Edinburgh as it has the ‘holy grail’ of one near-monopoly municipal operator, which is democratically-accountable (jointly-owned by four of the region’s councils), run in the public interest, and committed to reinvesting all profits in expanding and improving the public transport network (£20m of Lothian’s profits funded Edinburgh’s trams).

Buses in the other three lag far behind – having lost millions of miles of routes since deregulation and some of the most expensive fares in Britain. A single on privatised First Glasgow is £2.50, £1.80 on Lothian and £1.55 on buses regulated by Transport for London. In Scotland’s rural areas, bus fares can get into double digits.

We have to address these problems at a regional level, to connect the rural areas surrounding our big cities and enable easy and affordable commutes in-and-out, with the same flat fares for all no matter where you live. That means our local councillors working through the Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) which exist to cover each.

In Glasgow, that’s Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT, bringing together 12 councils), in Aberdeen that’s North-East of Scotland Transport Partnership (NESTRANS, bringing together 2 councils), and in Dundee it’s Tayside & Central Scotland Transport Partnership (TACTRAN, bringing together 4 councils). These public bodies are democratically accountable with local councillors from their constituent councils represented on their boards. To deliver the world-class, fully-integrated and affordable public transport networks which our City Regions urgently need – our RTPs must step up to the plate and start to take a leading role.



For NESTRANS and TACTRAN, this means becoming ‘Model 3’ RTPs, the most powerful of the three RTP models defined in the *Transport (Scotland) Act 2005*. Both have currently elected to be the ‘do-minimum’ Model 1 RTPs, which means they are almost completely insignificant. SPT is one of only three ‘Model 3’ RTPs in Scotland with responsibilities for directly running services, such as Glasgow Subway.

Then we need our RTPs to re-empower themselves further by seizing the aforementioned new powers under the *Transport (Scotland) Act 2019*, starting by setting up their own municipal operator. These could be arms-length companies (like Lothian) jointly-owned by the RTPs constituent councils. They can start off small, providing a cost-effective delivery of essential services which private operators have long-since abandoned. But the ultimate aim should be to take over more of the newly re-regulated network, eventually reinstating the regional municipal monopoly as in Edinburgh.

This would also open up new funding streams, with access to all the Scottish Government subsidies which currently benefit private bus companies. Their

income from the National Concessionary Card Scheme, the Bus Service Operator Grants, the Scottish Ultra-Low Emission Bus Scheme and more totals £326m annually, with much being hived off to shareholders.

But this much-needed municipal takeover can only be achieved by curbing the power of the big private bus companies. And it’s only the new ‘franchising’ power, which can finally force them to dance to our tune. Re-regulating the buses using this power would enable each RTP to plan its network and coordinate its timetables to the mantra ‘one network, one timetable, one ticket’, which has proved so successful for delivering full-integration in Munich City Region.

Under franchising, sections of the network can then be offered out to tender to any private companies which are prepared to meet all the standards and requirements the RTP sets. This is the system that London uses (as it was spared from full deregulation). And this is what Manchester is now rolling out – last year becoming the first UK City Region to commit to re-regulating its bus network since 1986 and which will be completed by 2024.

Our new municipal operators can also bid to run services within a franchised network, or have them directly awarded using the EC Directive 1370 (used in Munich and most other European cities with municipal operators), which has been (for the time being) translated into UK law under the *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018*.

It’s vital that we undertake these steps to start to undo the profound damage caused by years of deregulation and privatisation. So, wherever you live – in Strathclyde, Grampian or Tayside – please use our online tool to write to your councillors, especially those who sit on the RTP Boards, and demand they help us to take back our buses!

Ellie Harrison is an artist and activist based in Glasgow (<https://www.ellieharrison.com/>). She is founder and co-ordinator of Bring Back British Rail and the current Chair of the Get Glasgow Moving public transport campaign. See www.getglasgowmoving.org/campaign/election2022