**Real ‘Public’ Transport**

A key decision has been made to take bus services in Tyne and Wear back under council control could herald a revolution in the improvement of passenger services across the UK.

The North East Combined Authority, made up of representatives of 7 local councils, agreed to introduce a Quality Contracts Scheme which could give a £272 million economic boost to the region over the next decade in terms of reduced fares, better services, less road congestion – and a reduction and freezing of the subsidies that now go to the private bus companies.

According to Nexus, 80% of the bus companies’ profits leave the region as payments to shareholders, rather than being reinvested in the local network.

The decision, supported by the Northern TUC and Unite the Union, could herald a revolution in the way bus services are managed and developed across the country for the benefit of passengers. For the first time, a council regulated network of buses could be established outside London since 1986.

This will now mean a bus service outside London being taken back under public control for the first time since privatisation. After a long consultation and more than a year of debate with bus operators, who are opposed to the moves, the combined authority will counter the deregulation brought in by the Thatcher government in the 1980s, and franchise services while setting routes, timetables and fares.

All twelve Tyne and Wear MPs wrote to the members of the North East Combined Authority calling on them to vote in support of establishing the country's first regulated transport system.  Bridget Phillipson MP held a debate in parliament on the 15th October focusing on North East Transport and she has been instrumental in driving the campaign for better buses.  During her debate in parliament the MP stated that *‘improving our transport network is an important way to support growth and job creation’*. She also said that she heard from too many constituents who struggle to get to work, older people who tell how difficult it can be to get to hospital and residents who are left cut off and isolated on an evening.

The decision is the result of the region aiming to plug a funding gap which has been exacerbated by a huge bill for concessionary bus travel – a national legal requirement.

The local subsidy for buses in Newcastle has reached £55.2m this year while the operators – mainly Stagecoach, Arriva and Go-Ahead – have been making large profits.

The combined authority hopes the new quality contract scheme can help balance the books, while also keeping fares down and connecting communities.

Beth Farhat, Regional Secretary Northern TUC.