

Bus workers in northwest England escalate strikes for pay parity

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Bus drivers at two companies in the northwest of England are due to strike this week as part of an ongoing series of strikes over wages.

Around 2,000 bus drivers and engineers working for Arriva North West at 11 depots in northwest England, covering Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire, struck for 24-hours on November 8 in an ongoing pay dispute. Workers oppose the huge gap in pay between workers at different depots, with the Unite union acknowledging that these can be as much as £1.73 an hour and could widen to £2 under a new pay offer from the company.

Eighty-three percent of the Arriva North West workforce supported action on an 85 percent turnout. Strikes are scheduled for today and then on December 4, 7, 12, 13, 14, 20, 21, 22 and 23.

There have been seven days of strikes by the Arriva bus workers so far, with the additional strikes called after workers rejected the company's latest pay offer worth just one additional penny an hour.

While declaring the offer “cynical” and an “insult”, the Unite and GMB unions are calling for a pay increase of just 2p an hour—just as insulting to workers who face rising inflation and who, as with the working class as a whole, have seen historically low levels of pay imposed over the past decade by successive Labour and Conservative governments.

These attacks are being imposed as Arriva North West racked up profits of £25 million last year, and then rewarded its highest paid director £4.4 million in salary.

Drivers employed by First Manchester at the Rusholme depot in Manchester are set to continue their dispute over pay parity with a strike today. The dispute stems from the 2013 purchase by First Manchester of the depot from the previous employer, Finglands Coachways, with a promise made that pay parity would be implemented. This never happened, leaving 70 drivers being paid 23 percent or

£5,000 less a year than other First Manchester drivers doing the same jobs. First Manchester is part of the international transport conglomerate, FirstGroup, which also owns Greyhound, the largest bus operator in North America.

On October 2, 679 drivers at Rusholme and First's bus depot in the Great Lever district of Bolton struck for 24 hours.

Staff in Bolton were in dispute with First Manchester after rejecting a below inflation pay offer and opposing different pay rates for people doing the same job—with a £1.88 per hour gap between the highest and lowest earning drivers. The Bolton workers accepted a new offer recommended by the Unite union last month, which called off joint action by both depots planned for each Monday in October—effectively isolating the Rusholme workers' struggle.

The Rusholme depot strike began with 24-hour walkouts on Mondays when a “final offer” was rejected by drivers, as it would still have left a disparity of £4,000 a year. Ninety six percent voted for strike action, with further strikes planned for Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays until December 15.

First Manchester are attempting to break the Rusholme strike with a scabbing operation and claim that some of the drivers are working on strike days. Workers deny that drivers are involved, saying that FirstGroup are bringing in administration and managerial staff from other parts of the country to drive the buses.

Drivers maintain that the company can afford pay parity given that its parent company, FirstGroup, saw underlying pre-tax profits rise from its international operations—up 23 percent to £207 million. Overall group revenues over the year to March 31 were up 8.3 percent at £5.65 billion, with operating profit rising 12.7 percent to £339 million.

However, underlying operating profits in the UK in its bus operations fell 29 percent to £37 million, while rail

earnings dropped 26 percent to £53.8 million. This is behind First Manchester's stance in maintaining pay differentials between its 1,700 drivers that can be used to drive down wages for all workers to the level of those at Rusholme.

This action takes place amid a growing number of disputes among bus workers and in the transport sector.

More than 800 Stagecoach bus drivers, cleaners and engineers in Devon are involved in a dispute with management over pay and conditions. Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), based at garages in Exeter, Torquay and Barnstaple, were set to strike for 24-hours on three separate days in October. Seventy eight percent of the workers voted for strike action and nearly 90 percent for action short of a strike

According to the RMT, the company initially offered a pay increase of just 2.5 percent. Taking inflation into account this represented a pay cut.

On October 10, just days before the first strike was to begin, the RMT suspended all industrial action on the basis that they would put a new pay offer to a “referendum” of the workforce. No details have been made public regarding the offer.

The strike was called off under conditions in which RMT members at South Western Railway (SWR) were preparing to strike in early November in opposition to the imposition of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains. Train guards and drivers at SWR and other private rail franchises throughout the UK are opposing plans by the companies to impose the DOO system on trains, which will result in the eventual elimination of the guard's grade and severely jeopardize public safety.

The November 8 Arriva North West bus workers stoppage coincided with industrial action by RMT members employed by Merseyrail who are opposing the DOO system. The strikes are resulting in a severe curtailing of public transport availability in the region.

The November 8-9 strikes against DOO involved workers at five different rail firms—Southern, South Western Railways, Greater Anglia, Merseyrail and Arriva Rail North.

Rail workers at Arriva Cross Country, which runs services throughout the UK, held a 24-hour strike on November 19. Three other 24-hour strikes and one 48-hour strike at weekends are planned in the weeks leading up to the end of the year. RMT members are protesting plans by Arriva to recruit train managers without training to carry out the safety role currently carried out by guards. This is central to their aim of

imposing DOO. Arriva drivers also oppose attempts to impose compulsory overtime.

Around 1,800 non-driver members of the RMT, including train managers and on-board caterers working for Virgin West Coast, have voted 9-1 in favour of strike action.

Virgin had agreed a deal with the RMT for train drivers to buy out their claim for a one-hour reduction in the base working week by giving an additional £500 on their basic salary—which is pensionable—while asking RMT to enter into self-financing arrangements for other grades. The RMT is calling for its members to receive the same offer as the drivers. The union's executive will consider the result of the ballot but have made clear it is open to further talks before sanctioning any action.

Members of the RMT working for Virgin East Coast are to be balloted in the coming weeks over the same issue.

As more disputes erupt, the unions involved are doing everything to contain the situation and oppose any united offensive by transport workers, many of whom are employed by the same parent company. In relation to the Rusholme drivers, the Unite union has drawn out the struggle for pay parity for four years until it was no longer able to hold back drivers' demands.

Limited one day isolated strikes—not coordinated with other sections of workers in struggle—can only result in struggles being dissipated without seriously affecting management's draconian plans. As long as these struggles are kept under the control of the unions workers will be picked off group by group and defeated, with wages, conditions and public services continuing to deteriorate.

Everything depends on rank-and-file workers taking the initiative and fighting for the broadest mobilisation of the working class against the transport companies and the Conservatives, Labour and other corporate-controlled parties that back them.



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