

UK: Sheffield Supertram workers set to continue strike

Tony Robson
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Around 200 Supertram drivers and conductors in Sheffield, England, are striking against private operator Stagecoach to protest its pay offer—a derisory 26 pence per hour increase for year one and year two of a three-year pay award.

The first phase of strike action involved two 24-hour stoppages on July 9 and 12. The strike was solid and led to the near-complete suspension of all tram services across the network’s three lines spanning 18 miles of the fourth largest city in England. An escalation of the rolling strike action is planned with a 72-hour stoppage planned for July 20-22.

This is the first strike in the history of the Supertram, which has operated since 1994. The tram network was privatised under the Blair Labour government in 1997, when Stagecoach was awarded the franchise to maintain and operate the light-rail tram service until 2024.

The strike was endorsed by an overwhelming mandate. Members of the Unite trade union voted in June by a majority of 91.7 percent in favour of strike action and 95.8 percent for industrial action short of a strike, based on a turnout of over 83 percent.

Stagecoach Supertram’s last-ditch attempt to avert strike action failed after tram workers voted down a revised offer by 69.7 percent the week before rolling strike action was due to start. The new offer was simply a repackaging of the original. Instead of 26 pence per hour for year one, the offer was for 40 pence per hour increase. However, this was made void as it was based on the shortening of the contracted working week from 37.5 to 37 hours.

Tram workers are determined that the multibillion-pound company meet their demand of a 50 pence an hour increase. Drivers and conductors are currently paid approximately £23,000 and £18,000 a year,

respectively.

The response of Stagecoach Supertram was to launch a media witch-hunt and organise a strike-breaking operation. While the company claims it is unable to meet a modest pay increase of 50 pence per hour, it has the resources to arrange to bring buses and management personnel from its other franchises outside of Sheffield to run a tram bus replacement service during the strike.

In addition, it has threatened to withdraw the meagre pay offer that has been twice rejected by its workforce.

Managing director of Stagecoach Supertram Tim Bilby stated, “Strike action will reduce the money available to fund the pay deal and we will have no option but to withdraw the current offer if any strike action goes ahead.”

In the same press release, he denounced the planned 72-hour stoppage as tantamount to bankrupting the city’s economy, as it coincides with the annual music festival “Tramlines” over that weekend.

“Unite has deliberately targeted young people and the Tramlines festival with this planned strike action. It clearly has no thought for the impact on local people and the local economy, which gets a £9 million benefit from the Tramlines festival every year.”

Stagecoach Supertram’s overriding concern is that it will not be able to cash in on a festival that has become thoroughly corporatised since it first started 10 years ago. Until four years ago, this was a free event, but now any young person wishing to attend has to pay around £80 a head.

The citing of financial damages serves as a justification for making illegal any effective strike action.

Stagecoach Supertram has shown it will go to any lengths to break the resistance of tram drivers and conductors who are seeking to overcome a legacy of

low pay, which has been further exacerbated by the rising cost of living.

This is not a struggle that Supertram workers can conduct in isolation. It requires a broader mobilisation of transport workers against the company and its strike-breaking operation and the attempt to demonise opposition to what it considers to be its divine right to run a transport service as a lucrative business.

Such a struggle cannot be entrusted to Unite. With a membership over 1 million, Unite describes itself as Britain's largest union. However, it has no intention to mobilise even a fraction of its numerical strength of around 1.4 million members nationally to defeat this frontal assault.

Rather, Unite has presented the actions of Stagecoach Supertram as simply the outcome of local management going rogue.

Unite Regional Officer Phil Bown stated, "Supertram used to be a premium service but at the moment, with this management they have got in, it seems they don't want to listen and we try and contact the company and all they want to do is have a battle in the press."

Through its passive approach to the blatant intimidation being meted out to its members, Unite is signalling to the company that it remains the most reliable option in blocking a resurgence of militant opposition that would threaten to spill over sectional boundaries.

The febrile response by Stagecoach to the first strike on Supertram is based upon a realisation that any retreat in the face of workers' resistance will serve to embolden transport workers across its entire network of bus, coach and rail franchises.

Stagecoach Group plc is a global transport company operating in the UK, United States and Canada with a workforce worldwide of more than 34,000. It has amassed its profits primarily through the successive deregulation and privatisation of public transport infrastructure in the UK and its conversion into a for-profit industry run by private sector monopolies.

Stagecoach is the largest bus and coach operator in the UK, with major city bus operations in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Hull, Sheffield, Oxford and Cambridge, as well as inter-urban services linking smaller locations. It has been at the centre of the carve-up of former British Rail. It directly operates East Midlands Trains and has established joint ventures with

Richard Branson's Virgin Group on the East and West Coast inter-city services.

Last year, Stagecoach and Virgin Rail Group were the recipients of a taxpayer-funded bailout by the government of the East Coast Mainline franchise. The government agreed to shoulder the losses of £2 billion by terminating the franchise three years earlier than intended. On the back of this act of corporate welfare, the share prices of Stagecoach surged by 15 percent.

This has made Stagecoach Group co-founders Sir Brian Souter and Ann Gloag multimillionaires—with a combined wealth of £825 million—counted by the Sunday Times Rich List as the 164th wealthiest in the UK.

The dispute at Stagecoach Supertram demonstrates that even the fight for a small pay increase cannot be taken forward outside of a broader mobilisation of the working class, to challenge the grip of the corporations over every aspect of public services and make inroads into the profits margins of the wealthy elite.



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