Sheffield Supertram workers hold 72-hour strike, as strike ballot in Manchester begins

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Stagecoach Supertram drivers and conductors in Sheffield, England began a 72-hour strike Friday, after rejecting the company's offer of a miserly 26 pence an hour wage increase. The strike took place as a ballot for industrial action by Manchester MetroLink tram workers got underway, amid growing anger by drivers over substandard pay.

This shows that conditions exist for a unified fight by tram workers against the major transport corporations. But such a fight is only possible if workers break free from the grip of the Unite union, whose strategy consists of dividing workers on a company by company basis, isolating the present disputes and giving management a free hand to arrange strike-breaking.

The weekend's strike in Sheffield was the third this month by Stagecoach Supertram drivers and conductors after a 91.7 percent strike vote in June. The hourly rate for Sheffield conductors is £9.40 an hour, and for drivers around £11.78 (equivalent to £18,000 for conductors and £23,000 for drivers). The workers are demanding a 50p an hour increase to deal with cost of living pressures.

If the current three-year pay offer from Stagecoach Supertram were to go through, wages would rise by 26p an hour in the first two years and by even less in the third year, reducing workers to minimum wage status.

Pressure on drivers and conductors has been building for years as Stagecoach—a FTSE 250-listed company and the second largest transport group in the UK—has sought to gouge increased profits from its workforce. Stagecoach Supertram passenger numbers have grown from 7.8 million in 1996 to 12.8 million in 2017, while timetables introduced in January mean that services start earlier in the morning, with "non-peak" services reduced.

On July 9 and 12, service across the network was suspended, with the 24-hour strikes winning solid support, showing the determination of workers to fight. The rolling strike action is the first in Stagecoach Supertram's history and is part of a growing militant sentiment in the working class after decades of stagnating wages and austerity.

From the outset, Stagecoach Supertram management have adopted a belligerent response. They fear that any concessions in Sheffield will have a knock-on effect among its 39,000-strong workforce. The wider Stagecoach Group conglomerate owns 16 percent of the bus market and 25 percent of the rail market, including a 49 percent stake in Virgin Rail Group.

After workers rejected Stagecoach Supertram's revised offer, the company began a major strike-breaking operation.

A "limited tram service," staffed by managers, ran from 7 a.m.–7 p.m. throughout the strike. Trams departed every 20 minutes from Sheffield train station to Hillsborough and every 30 minutes from Cathedral to Meadowhall (where the city's major shopping mall is located).

This scabbing operation was effectively given a free hand by Unite. The union ensured that pickets mounted at Nunnery Square depot and opposite the Castle Gate tram stop in Sheffield city centre made no attempt to prevent the movement of trams, with officials explaining that pickets could not obstruct "company property."

At the same time, Stagecoach used its national bus fleet to organise a replacement bus service for the Tramlines music festival. This was advertised more than a week in advance. Buses ran from 7 p.m. each night, from Hillsborough Park back into the city—charging £3 per ticket for the privilege.

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This elicited widespread disgust from festival goers, with one tweeting: “Appalling way to treat your customers—seeking to profiteer from the strike by refusing to accept existing tram tickets on these buses. If your attitude to driver & conductor pay & overall morale is along similar lines, then I’m not surprised that they’ve all walked out!”

Unite made no appeal for solidarity action by Stagecoach drivers, stating that “secondary boycott action is of course illegal.” This, despite the solidarity shown by First and Stagecoach drivers in Sheffield who tooted their horns in support of pickets as they drove by. Both Stagecoach and First bus drivers have themselves struck this past year—in Leeds, Cumbria, Merseyside and Aberdeen—over low pay.

Unite also directed workers not to speak out publicly, which effectively meant the company’s media witch-hunt could not be effectively countered by explaining the issues and appealing for support.

Speaking to the *Sheffield Star* on the eve of this weekend’s strike, Supertram Managing Director (MD) Tim Bilby said: “Our door is still open to talk to Unite but we are very clear that any pay deal needs to be realistic and we are at the very limit of what is affordable.”

Unite Regional Officer Steve Clark made clear the union’s perspective is to get back to the negotiating table: “At this moment in time there’s no meetings arranged. Last words with the MD were probably Thursday where I said, ‘Come what may, we need to get together next week,’ and I’m still waiting for a call. What will our action be next? We’ll have to contemplate that now. We’re trying not to disrupt the travelling public too much within Sheffield so we’re going to consider our position.”

He explained the paltry demands being pursued by Unite. “Our aspiration would be £10 an hour for the conductors, because there is a campaign within Sheffield for £10 an hour as a living wage and we were looking for £12.28 for the drivers, which isn’t massive. But the company won’t even entertain that.”

Clark stated that train drivers, who have comparable skills and responsibilities to tram drivers, earn £40,000-£50,000 a year, while tram drivers in Manchester on £29,000 were preparing to strike because they’re not being paid enough, concluding that Sheffield workers were treated as the “poor relations.”

But Unite, the largest union in the UK, with 1.4 million members, is policing precisely these conditions. On their own admission, the wage increases they are advancing in Sheffield are paltry, but they are just as fearful as the company of any struggle that unites tram, rail and bus workers for decent pay and conditions.

Workers should reject with contempt the claims by Stagecoach Supertram Managing Director Tim Bilby that their demands are “unaffordable.” In 2017, the Stagecoach Group’s operating income was £192.8 million. The company’s profits are generated entirely by the labour of drivers, conductors, mechanics and other staff, but used to enrich a tiny handful of major shareholders.

To take forward the struggle at Stagecoach Supertram, workers in Sheffield must urgently form a rank-and-file committee, independent of the unions, and appeal for support from tram workers at Manchester MetroLink, and bus drivers and rail workers across the country. This Thursday, drivers at the South Western Railway are to begin eight days of strikes—to continue into September—to protest the planned introduction of driver only operations. South Western Railway is one of many private rail franchises seeking to bring in driver only trains that will imperil public safety and result in the elimination of 6,000 conductors’ jobs.

The demand must be raised for the expropriation of the private transport companies, placing them under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class. The subordination of public transportation to private profit has proven a disaster, with services run into the ground, fares raised to unaffordable levels and the jobs, safety conditions and pay for tens of thousands of workers having suffered. Billions of dollars must be poured into a programme of public works to massively expand the public transport network, making affordable and high-quality transport available for all.

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