

UK: Unite suspends strike action on Sheffield Supertram to recommend sellout deal

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The Unite union has suspended strike action on Stagecoach Supertram in Sheffield to recommend a revised pay offer from the company. The offer betrays the demand by tram workers for a 50 pence an hour increase to tackle years of low pay and rising living costs.

The August 3 announcement was made after Unite met with the company the previous day at Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). Unite has put the proposed deal to a ballot with the result due to be announced Friday, August 10. The union called off eight days of further strike action due to start from August 18.

The full details of the revised deal will not be disclosed publicly until the result of the ballot has been announced. But it amounts to a meagre 4 pence increase on the original offer of a 26 pence per hour increase, which was rejected by an overwhelming majority of around 200 tram drivers and conductors, leading to strike action.

The three-year pay deal consists of an increase in the hourly rate of 30 pence in year 1 and 29 pence for year 2. For year 3 the increase would be 2.5 percent. The company's claim that this is above the national average for current pay settlements counts for nothing, as Stagecoach Supertram drivers and conductors rank among the lowest paid in the sector. The hourly rate is around £11.78 for drivers and £9.40 for conductors. The increase for drivers over the next two years would be around 2.5 percent and just over 3 percent for conductors based on an appallingly low wage. Over the lifetime of the deal this amounts to below or less than a percentage point above the forecast inflation rate measured by the Retail Price Index.

Since the start of the dispute, Stagecoach Supertram has said it would not make any significant concessions.

The company has been true to its word.

The same cannot be said for Unite.

The union has moved with unseemly haste to call off the strike. It is now taking ownership of a deal which is little different from the original pay offer it rejected as derisory. Unite has named its price and it is a mere 4 pence.

The first strike in the history of Supertram has shown that workers are not just in conflict with Stagecoach, but with the Unite union.

The first two-day stoppages on July 9 and 12 led to the near shutdown of the tram network. The subsequent 72-hour stoppage meant that the company faced the high-profile embarrassment of being unable to provide a functioning service during the 10th annual music festival which takes its name "Tramlines" from the light rail network.

There were large turnouts on the picket lines at the main depot in Nunnery Drive and at Supertram premises in the city centre. Confronted with this, the company organised a strike-breaking operation by deploying managers to drive trams and run a replacement bus service using its fleet and drivers from its other franchises.

Unite was obliged to call the strike action in a bid to retain some credibility, as Sheffield tram workers' pay was slipping further behind and closer to the threshold of the National Living Wage.

A tipping point had been reached and, according to Unite's rhetoric, it was a case of this far and no further. It has not taken more than a few weeks and a determined struggle by tram workers to expose this as empty bluster.

From day one, Unite, the largest union in the country, with a membership of over 1.4 million, has marshalled its forces to isolate Supertram workers and undermine

their resistance. It has enforced a ban on workers speaking publicly or using social media to rally support and counter the propaganda war waged by Stagecoach Supertram through the local news media. At the same time, it has opposed appeals for solidarity action from Stagecoach drivers drafted in to run the replacement bus service on strike days by citing legislation against secondary action. The draconian laws mean that while companies such as Stagecoach can utilise their monopoly position and vast resources to organise secondary action, workers cannot.

The struggle at Supertram demonstrates that even the most basic demands of workers are at odds with the entire framework through which they are tied to the unions.

The privatisation and deregulation of public transport over many decades has led to its carve-up and monopolisation by for-profit companies such as Stagecoach. Yet Unite avoids even making reference to the Stagecoach Group in any of its coverage of the Supertram dispute because it is opposed to unifying the struggles of transport workers against the competitive demands made by the second largest transport group in the UK, an FTSE 250 listed company.

Stagecoach makes its fortunes from the exploitation of 39,000 workers across the transport sector in Britain and North America who drive the coaches, buses, trams and trains on which millions of passengers depend. Any loss in market share in any of these sectors must be compensated for by the workforce as a whole and through extending its monopoly at the expense of its rivals. It is only on this basis that it can continue to pay out its high dividends to its shareholders. The claim that Supertram workers' pay demand is unaffordable is refuted by the fact that its founder and major shareholder, Brian Souter, is ranked as the 164th richest person in the UK. The combined wealth of Souter and his sister Ann Gloag is £825 million.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on Supertram workers to reject the recommendation of Unite to abandon their struggle. Instead they must take the fight against Stagecoach out of the hands of Unite and independently make links with other sections of workers.

Tram workers in Manchester are being balloted by Unite over strike action against private operator Keolis Amey Metroline, as opposition grows to

substandard pay throughout the sector.

A rejection of the proposed pay offer of 3.3 percent would see Manchester tram workers take strike action on the August Bank Holiday that would have coincided with the strike action Unite called off in Sheffield.

Workers on South Western Railway are taking eight days of strike action against the imposition of driver-only operations through which the private operators are seeking to slash 6,000 jobs nationally in a move that will undermine public safety.

Privatisation has been an unmitigated disaster with services slashed, unending fare hikes and a race to the bottom for workers. The fight against poverty pay and the elimination of jobs and increased productivity must therefore be linked to challenging the private operators and placing transport under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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