

UK: Stagecoach faces 20 disputes as bus drivers fight pay restraint

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Unite the union has confirmed that private bus operator Stagecoach is facing 20 separate pay disputes across its national workforce.

Stagecoach is the largest bus and coach operator in the UK, with a 24,000 workforce and major city bus operations across England, Wales and Scotland. It also operates the low-cost coach service Megabus, Scotland's biggest coach operator Scottish Citylink, and the Supertram service in Sheffield.

The FTSE listed company experienced a slump in profits in the year up to May 1 causing it to cancel a dividend pay out to its shareholders, but it still turned a profit of £58.4 million. Stagecoach is majority owned by Sir Brian Souter and his sister Dame Ann Gloag, who founded the Perth based company in 1980 and cashed in on bus service privatisation. According to the *Sunday Times* Rich List 2021 they were ranked the 14th richest people in Scotland, with a combined wealth of £650 million.

The company faces a groundswell of opposition to pay restraint from bus workers, fuelled by the abuses and exploitation endured throughout the pandemic. They have sacrificed while the private operators have been given handouts by the Johnson government for lost passenger revenue and the furlough scheme. In England alone the combined subsidies came to £10 billion by the end of last year.

The prospect of a national strike across Stagecoach is being opposed by Unite, which is warning the company that it must work with the union to prevent this.

Unite regional co-ordinator Dougie Maguire speaking on the situation in Scotland told the BBC, 'If Stagecoach do not come to their senses, then many of the nation's major bus routes will grind to a halt if our members vote for industrial action.'

Stagecoach drivers across the UK have either voted for strike action or are being balloted. The Unite website

provides an incomplete picture and in many cases does not state the details of the pay offers rejected or the number of workers involved. The scale of the opposition can be seen in the following examples:

- Scotland—1,500 drivers, administrative workers, engineering staff and cleaners are balloting for strike action at depots covering urban and rural areas in Angus, Ardrrossan, Ayr, Brodick, Cumbernauld, Dumfries, Dundee, Fife, Inverness, Highlands and Islands, Kilmarnock and Perth.

- Wales—Bus drivers at Blackwood, Brynmawr, and Cwmbran depots in Caerphilly, South Wales have voted for strike action by 98 percent on a 77 percent turnout. The company says the £9.50 per hour wage, barely above the national minimum, will only be raised to £10.50 in exchange for giving up paid meal breaks. No dates for strike action have been confirmed.

- England—Ballots are being held in many cities and urban areas with some results due mid-October. In South Lancashire around 250 drivers at Preston and Chorley depots voted for strike action, beginning with a three-day stoppage from October 14. Around 800 drivers in the North East at depots in Newcastle, Sunderland and Deeside have rejected a 2 percent pay offer and are balloting on strike action. In Manchester, around 1,000 drivers are being balloted at depots in Hyde Road, Sharston, Stockport and Aston. Stagecoach is the largest bus operator across the city and surrounding towns, Oldham, Rochdale and Wigan. In Chesterfield in the East Midlands drivers and cleaners have been balloted for strike action with results due October 1.

The outrage of Unite at pay restraint is feigned. The union admits most Stagecoach drivers they represent did not receive a pay raise in 2020, even while working throughout the pandemic and risking their lives. This is the direct result of the corporatist agreements signed between Unite and the private operators to protect their

profits in the name of “operational efficiency” while bus drivers were left defenceless in relation to safety, terms and conditions. The trade unions were central in promoting the lie that “we are all in this together” while they rubber stamped the shredding of worker’s rights.

Unite has not even presented a demand of its own regarding a pay raise across Stagecoach, even after bus workers have suffered an effective a pay cut for nearly two years with inflation running at close to 4 percent.

The hollow fighting talk of Unite is epitomised by the newly elected General Secretary Sharon Graham, who has been promoted by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as leading a militant turn in the union bureaucracy.

As part of her claim to restore the union’s role in defending workers interests, Graham has said she will bring together workers in industrial sectors of Unite to establish national bargaining agreements. However, this would bring Unite into conflict with the privatised carve-up of the bus network which has led to a multi-tiered system of wages for workers performing the same job within the same company and even depot. The average hourly rate for a bus driver is now £10.20 (22 percent below the national average).

Graham’s pro forma statements on pay restraint therefore present the issue as one of isolated disputes to be settled locally rather than as a fight against the same multi-million-pound company.

Graham and the Unite bureaucracy are working to dissipate opposition and prove to Stagecoach and other private operators they can fulfil the role of industrial policeman to prevent a unified struggle that would threaten their ability to amass profits.

Earlier this year 2,000 bus drivers in London took strike action over pay against RATP Dev. The selective strike across its three subsidiaries was wound down through sellout agreements keeping bus drivers at one subsidiary at the bottom of the pay scale in London and increases overall of little more than 1 percent.

The first action taken in the transport sector by Graham as Unite General Secretary was to oversee the suspension of a strike on September 25/26 by 300 tram workers on Greater Manchester’s Metrolink, the largest tram and light rail system in the country. Tram workers had voted to strike by 97 percent against a 1 percent pay offer spread over two years. Graham said the suspension of the strike action was the result of a “greatly improved offer” but did not publicly disclose any details of the proposal to be put to a ballot based on a recommendation to accept.

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revised offer consisted of a below inflation increase of 2.5 percent for 2021 and the same uplift next year and expected it would be rejected. One tram worker asked, “What right do Unite have to call off the strike?”

Without referencing the result of the ballot, Unite announced on October 1 that strike action has been reinstated, with the first stoppage on October 10 and that talks had broken down with Metrolink’s operators Keolis/Amey on September 30 over another “improved offer”. The company said it was not prepared to improve on an offer Unite had already accepted.

While publicly stating that Unite is in full support of the strike, Graham is involved in back-room machinations with management to thwart the fight for a genuine pay increase.

The struggle unfolding at Metrolink and Stagecoach is precisely what Graham and the Unite bureaucracy sought to prevent through the sellout deal she directly oversaw to end the 11 week bus workers strike at Go North West Manchester against fire and rehire. The fabled “leverage” tool Graham has championed was pitched exclusively to the corporate boardroom and shareholders. Unite did not lift a finger to mobilise support among its transport section of 95,000 members. This isolated the dispute, enabling Unite to impose reduced sick pay, unpaid meals breaks and compulsory overtime.

The leverage bus workers require is not the corporatist model of Graham but the mobilisation of their collective strength to challenge the grip of the corporate oligarchy over society.

Stagecoach drivers are urged to support the campaign for the reinstatement of the victimised London bus driver David O’Sullivan, which is a test case for workers’ rights during the pandemic. The independent voice of the working class must not be silenced through the collusion of trade unions and Labour Party with the employers and the government. Against the normalisation of death and a renewed assault on their pay and conditions to maximise profits, workers must build the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees to take the fight into their own hands and extend their struggles beyond all industrial and national boundaries.



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