

UK: Unite and the RMT unions combine to prevent a fightback over pay at Stagecoach

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Since becoming Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has acted as Britain's chief industrial firefighter, drowning strikes at birth beneath an insincere torrent of militant rhetoric.

At the Stagecoach bus company, her allotted task has been to prevent 20 separate disputes against pay restraint from becoming national strike action.

On the pretext of modest improvements in the original contemptible pay offers tabled, Graham is shutting down disputes at an unprecedented speed. She is attempting to fulfil this role while striking a pose of opposition to Stagecoach.

Aware of the militant mood in the working class and emerging anti-capitalist sentiment, a Unite video described Stagecoach as "stinking rich" and "greedy". But it is telling bus drivers to accept pay deals which are below the current rate of inflation of 4.8 percent (RPI).

Graham and Unite this week pushed through a sellout agreement on the Manchester Metrolink tram/light rail system based on a de facto pay cut for this year of 3 percent and the same amount or RPI for 2022. This was after it suspended strike action for a second time by 300 tram workers against private operator Keolis/Amey last week on October 8.

On the same day Unite suspended strike action on Metrolink it also suspended the first of several strikes on Stagecoach voted for across the UK, including Wales and Scotland. Around 250 bus drivers at Preston and Chorley garages in north-west England working for the Stagecoach subsidiary Ribble Motors Limited were due to take three days of consecutive strike action from October 14.

Graham has hailed a settlement based upon acceptance of a 4.4 percent pay increase for the year to May 2022 as a "tremendous victory" securing "a fair

pay increase from Stagecoach."

In the same press release Unite reported that bus drivers at the Gilmoor depot in Liverpool, which had been part of the same operating group and had voted for strike action, had accepted a 2.25 percent increase for the year to April 2022.

On Thursday, Unite suspended strike action by 1,000 Stagecoach bus drivers in Greater Manchester due to start across the city from October 26 and consisting of eight days of 24-hour stoppages. To date no press release has been issued on the decision by Unite which was taken on the day the mandate for strike action was announced. A Unite spokesperson told *Transport Network* that this was "a gesture of goodwill" to the company and it would be putting a revised offer to its membership.

Unite has opposed any integration of the struggles based on a demand for a pay rise based upon parity for all Stagecoach drivers. The rash of disputes reflects rising opposition to the exploitative conditions Unite has helped establish through its collaboration with the private operators throughout the pandemic. In most cases Stagecoach bus workers have suffered a pay freeze since 2020. Unite is policing the multi-teared wage system that has emerged since privatisation, with drivers performing the same job on entirely different pay rates around the UK, set well below the national average wage.

In South Wales, Unite has tried to avert the selective strike action starting October 19 at three depots in the Caerphilly area. The union pursued talks last week with Stagecoach Wales through the arbitration service ACAS. Unite went into the talks on bended knee, demanding an increase from the present minimum wage level pay of just £9.50 an hour to just £10.50. Even this pittance was rejected by the company which

demanding reduced sick pay and unpaid meal breaks in exchange for £10.10 an hour.

In Scotland, Unite has balloted 1,500 Stagecoach drivers, administration staff and engineers across urban and rural areas Angus, Ardrossan Ayr, Brodick, Cumbernauld, Dumfries, Dundee, Fife, Inverness, Highlands and Islands, Kilmarnock, and Perth.

On October 6, around 600 bus workers at Fife, Perth and Strathtay depots on Stagecoach East voted to strike by a 90 percent plus majority. Unite has formally demanded a 4.9 percent pay rise, but described the company offer of 2.4 percent, rejected by its membership, as “a step forward”. It has not announced any dates for strike action, with regional officer Dougie Maguire stating, “We want to emphasise that Unite’s ambition has been to solve this dispute amicably, and without our members having to take strike action.”

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) is playing the same role as Unite in the demobilisation of bus workers. It has suspended strike action at two of the three Stagecoach subsidiaries set to take one day strike action on October 18. The collective strike by over 1,000 bus workers at more than 8 depots from Devon in south-west England to Chesterfield, Worksop and Mansfield in the east Midlands was meant to buttress the RMT’s credentials as a militant alternative to Unite.

In its press release on October 13 the RMT does not even mention the suspension of the strikes at the three east Midlands depots, only announcing that the strike in Devon at Stagecoach South West is to proceed. It reported the company pay offer came with strings to overhaul terms and conditions, including a reduction of sick pay to sick pay to 60 percent of basic pay. It added that there was no revised offer from the 2.2 percent and a one-off lump sum payment of £300 limited to engineering, cleaning, administration, and supervisory staff. The RMT has left 700 bus workers in Devon isolated.

The strike by nearly 200 bus workers at Stonegravel garage in Chesterfield at South Yorkshire Traction Company would have been the only joint action by the RMT and Unite at Stagecoach. While nationally Unite is the main union on the buses, the RMT has a majority at the depot where both unions have presided over a pay freeze since 2020. Unite has reported that the strike action has been suspended to consider a revised deal it

has not publicly disclosed, and local media has reported the same at Worksop and Mansfield.

The campaign by the RMT, “Professional staff deserve a professional wage,” is pure bluster, with the union omitting to table any independent pay demand. The real relationship between the RMT and bus drivers is shown by the huge numbers of resignations and staff shortages at Stagecoach in Devon, part of a wider national trend. *Devon Live* reported that in the three months to August, around 150 bus drivers had left the company across depots in Exeter, Plymouth, Torquay and Barnstable, based upon figures supplied by the RMT.

The response cited from the RMT regional spokesperson Barry West is an indictment of its own role in colluding with Stagecoach’s attacks. He states, “The likelihood is that some of the issues about shortages are being caused by Covid but how can the company explain 55 staff leaving in Plymouth. We have clear information from our members they are leaving due to poor wages and it appears to be an ongoing problem.”

The cursory reference to Covid infections without any demand for protective measures is typical. Neither Unite the RMT has organised any action against the spread of infections that has left bus drivers with one of the highest death rates of any profession.

Stagecoach bus workers must take their fight out of the hands of Unite and the RMT by setting up a rank-and-file committee to forge links with rail and other transport workers as part of a broader struggle against ramped-up exploitation by big business and the super-rich. This must be connected to a programme to end the pandemic through a policy of eradication placing the protection of health and lives above corporate profit. This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank -and-File Committees.



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