

UK: RMT union suspends Devon bus strike at Stagecoach Southwest

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19 October 2021

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) has suspended strike action over pay by around 700 bus drivers in Devon at Stagecoach South West, due to take place Monday.

Sunday's last minute announcement by the RMT halting the one-day stoppage follows its decision to suspend strike action at two other subsidiaries of Stagecoach, at East Midlands and Yorkshire Traction Company last week. Bus workers at all three Stagecoach subsidiaries were to have taken joint strike action on Monday as part of the union's campaign, "Professional staff deserve a professional wage."

The determination of bus workers to fight for a genuine pay increase against management's original derisory offers was demonstrated in the 9 to 1 vote to strike. Within the space of a week, the RMT has ensured that the largest private bus and coach operator in the UK has been spared collective action by bus workers stretching from the south-west of England to the east Midlands.

The RMT press release on the suspension of strike action at Stagecoach South West is two cursory sentences citing an intention to "allow members to have their say on a revised offer received from the company in last ditch talks today."

The RMT did not consult its membership over jettisoning the strike mandate and collective action. It is attempting to isolate and grind down the opposition. As with the case at East Midlands and Yorkshire Traction Company, the RMT has not publicly disclosed any details of the proposed revised agreement at Stagecoach South West.

The local media in Devon has reported that the offer is for an increase of 4.4 percent. At East Midlands bus drivers at the Mansfield garage informed the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that the revised offer was

for 4.5 percent and a lump sum of £400. No details are available at Yorkshire Traction Company at its Chesterfield depot, where the RMT and Unite have presided over a situation in which bus workers have not received a pay rise throughout the pandemic, a common practice across the company.

In the 20 or so pay disputes that have broken out across Stagecoach in the UK, neither the RMT or Unite have tabled a central demand to uplift bus workers' wages and establish parity pay. It has not taken long for the rhetorical outrage of both unions against "penny pinching" by the multi-million-pound company to evaporate. With an inflation rate presently standing at 4.8 percent (RPI) the unions are suppressing the fight by bus workers to protect their living standards through repeated balloting over revised offers that fall short of a genuine pay increase. The primary function of the union bureaucracy is to prevent national strike action, which would unify the struggles against Stagecoach and endanger its corporatist relations with the company.

The Unite bureaucracy under General Secretary Sharon Graham has been working to ensure not a single strike voted for on Stagecoach comes to pass. The website of Unite has become a bulletin board noting strikes ended or suspended at Stagecoach. These include the suspension of strike action by 1,000 Greater Manchester drivers to ballot over a revised deal and accepting de facto pay cuts in Lancashire and Cheshire. The headline marking the sell-out deal pushed through against Greater Manchester tram workers on Metrolink sums up the role of Unite as an industrial policeman, "Strike fears at Manchester Metrolink ended as pay offer accepted."

The only strike to actually go ahead is at Stagecoach Wales on Tuesday, at South Wales depots in Cwmbran,

Blackwood and Brynmaw. Unite went to the arbitration service ACAS for talks with the company, but rejected a miserly increase to £10.50 an hour. The current rate of £9.50 per hour is just above the minimum wage of £8.91.

Unite in Scotland is closing down possible strike action across the country at Stagecoach, after balloting 1,500 drivers, administration staff and engineers. Around 600 bus drivers at Stagecoach East voted by 9 to 1 to strike, rejecting a revised pay offer of 2.4 percent. Unite formally presented a demand for a 4.9 percent increase for this year, but is now recommending acceptance of a 7.5 percent increase over two years to dress up another below inflation pay settlement.

The suppression of strike action over pay by Unite and the RMT serves the broader aim of preventing any open expression of the conflict between the working class and the corporate oligarchy and to ensure this does not intersect with opposition to the criminal handling of the pandemic by the Johnson government.

The ditching of all public health measures to halt the spread of infection is based on the same economic and social calculations lying behind the attempts to enforce wage restraint. Both are required to ensure profits continue to flow to the corporate and financial elite while greater exploitation is imposed on the working class.

The reckless throwing open of the economy in which the pandemic is allowed to let rip has impacted on supply chains, with labour shortages in key sectors that are also reflected on public transport.

There is a fear in ruling circles that the working class through strike action might leverage this situation to reverse the decades-long assault on pay and conditions. This fear is shared by its servants in the union bureaucracy, which is tasked with suppressing the class struggle.

Over the past week, mock outrage and militant tub thumping by the RMT against Stagecoach has been replaced by a careful defining of its role as partner of the company. RMT South West regional organiser Barry West told *Devon Live* that in his 34 years with the union, he had never known such a strength of feeling for strike action.

The company was seeking to return bus drivers to Victorian times, he said, with a reduction of sick pay to

60 percent of normal wages, and extending the duration of unpaid meal breaks from 45 minutes to a new maximum of one-hour twenty minutes. He then complained, “Instead of working with us to find a solution there is an agenda of ‘it’s our way or no way’, undermining our genuine attempt to support the Company and resolve its constant haemorrhaging of staff for as many years as we can remember.”

For the RMT the overriding concern is that Stagecoach must be able to operate a viable bus service. It has stressed that the main source of the driver shortage is mass resignations due to low pay, followed by the spread of infections from COVID-19. The pandemic is referenced by the union only in passing, without even any call for the enforcing mitigation measures.

There could be no clearer indictment of the corporatist relations between the union bureaucracy and Stagecoach. It is seeking to resume its partnership with Stagecoach by strangling a strike movement at birth. This is the real content of the endless behind closed doors negotiations between the RMT and Stagecoach over “revised offers”.

Bus workers must take the pay fight out of the hands of the RMT and Unite and form rank-and-file committees to unify and take forward a unified offensive. This must be joined with the fight to end the pandemic through a policy of eradication, using the full range of health measures to protect workers health and lives. This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank -and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We encourage all bus workers to sign up and attend the global seminar on October 24 “How to end pandemic—the case for eradication.”



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