

Stagecoach South Wales bus drivers strike as Unite and RMT block national action

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Over 200 bus drivers at Stagecoach in South Wales took five days of strike action from Tuesday last week against pay restraint by the UK's largest bus and coach operator.

The strike involved Brynmawr, Cwmbran and Blackwood garages in the Caerphilly area and impacted on more than 50 bus routes, with a large attendance on picket lines and popular protests.

Speaking to *Cwmbran Life* driver Sally Cox stated, "I would say that 98% of the public are with us. I do feel very, very sorry for people trying to get to work. But at the end of the day, £9.50 we are on."

The company has denied bus drivers even a miserly £1 increase to £10.50 an hour. The agreement with Unite to defer a wage negotiations in 2020 means that current pay has declined to the level of the minimum wage when it is uplifted by the Chancellor Rishi Sunak in Wednesday's budget.

Stagecoach South Wales claims that jobs and services would have to be cut for the £10.50 rise to be met. *Nation.Cymru* reported that its £2.1 million pre-tax profits this year was up on the £1.5 million for the previous year and that it received £1 million from the government via the furlough scheme.

The fight against Stagecoach cannot be entrusted to Unite, which has admitted that its demand for £10.50 per hour "does not fairly reflect the value of the work our members carry out" but is in line with local competitors. The union's attempt to avert strike action through talks at the arbitration service ACAS was thwarted because the company only offered £10.10 with strings, including a reduction in sick pay and unpaid meals breaks. During the strike action last week, a revised offer of £10.30 an hour, with the same strings, was rejected by bus drivers.

Strike action was to commence on Monday for 24

hours followed by rolling strike action at the end of this week until mid-November. Further talks at ACAS were scheduled. Even if any climbdown over the £10.50 per hour demand was made by the company, it would be in exchange for the cost cutting measures already outlined.

The strike by drivers in South Wales demonstrates the determination to wage a fight echoed in strike mandates across the UK at Stagecoach. It has been isolated thanks to Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT). Both have collectively demobilised more than 20 pay disputes across the Stagecoach network. Yesterday Unite announced a "significantly improved pay" had been accepted by 400 of its members at Stagecoach West Scotland after it suspended strike action voted for on a 92 percent majority. This follows the suspension of a strike by 600 bus workers at Stagecoach East, with the accepted pay deal of 7.5 percent over two years, which amounts to another below inflation agreement.

Unite and the RMT suspended pay claims in 2020 and have ensured that bus drivers have worked throughout the pandemic without an increase. This has been further aggravated by the spiralling cost of living, with inflation running at 4.9 percent (RPI).

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has celebrated the pay settlements averting strike action across Stagecoach as great victories. The latest example involves 1,000 drivers at Greater Manchester Bus Company South who returned a mandate for strike action Unite described as "overwhelming". This was suspended immediately, and a 3.7 percent pay rise and a £150 lump sum went through last Wednesday.

Graham had stated, "Low pay is the scourge of the bus industry. Stagecoach made profits touching £60m last year and has £875m in the bank. Yet it claims it

cannot make a decent inflation-busting offer to its staff.

“Unite will be relentless in its campaign to ensure that our members at Stagecoach receive a fair pay increase. Stagecoach’s management leaves us with no alternative.”

Yet she cannot point to a single pay settlement reached at Stagecoach which is “inflation busting.” Not only does the scourge of low pay remain but Unite has maintained the unequal wage system introduced through privatisation. This has led to bus drivers pay falling below the national average. In the north west of England alone Unite backed pay deals following the suspension of strike action ranging from 4.4 percent in Preston and Chorley, 3.7 percent in Greater Manchester and just 2.25 percent in Liverpool.

Unite is aware of the insurgent mood brewing against the major corporations, launching a media campaign against Stagecoach describing it as “Stinking Rich”. The disjoint between the rhetoric of Unite and the content of these deals demonstrates the essentially corporatist role of the union. Under Graham it remains a labour police force, nipping in the bud any collective industrial struggle and undermining the fight against social inequality.

Any notion that the RMT represents a militant alternative to Unite has been refuted by its suspending the collective one day strike action by over 1,000 bus workers at three subsidiaries of Stagecoach from south west England to the east Midlands on October 18.

At Stagecoach subsidiary Yorkshire Traction Company (YTC) in Chesterfield, east Midlands, Unite and the RMT suspended joint strike action due to have taken place last Monday by nearly 200 drivers at Stonegravels garage. They have pushed through a 4.5 percent pay agreement with a £400 lump sum. As one driver who rejected the deal told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Our lives are worth more than £400. We have risked not coming home to our families during the pandemic.”

At Stagecoach North East more than 800 bus drivers, engineers, cleaners, supervisors and managers voted last week for 12 days of rolling strike action from November 8 in rejection of a 2 percent offer. The mandate for action was 92 percent, involving the Slatyford and Walkergate depots and garages in Newcastle, South Shields in Sunderland, and Stockton and Hartlepool, Teesside.

In South Yorkshire, around 560 bus workers at Stagecoach depots in Sheffield, Barnsley and Rotherham voted down a company pay offer by a 97 percent majority on a 90 percent turnout. Unite has not disclosed the contents of the pay offer. Voting is currently taking place in a strike ballot which closes November 8.

Bus workers need to draw the lessons of the past few weeks. Their opposition to pay restraint by Stagecoach is as much a fight against Unite and the RMT. Stagecoach has established a new status quo ante with Unite and the RMT by revising the original derisory offers but ensuring compliance with below inflation pay agreements.

The fight against low pay is bound up with the imposition of a range of other exploitative practices not just at Stagecoach but all the private operators. It takes place under conditions in which bus drivers have been left defenceless against the resurgence of the pandemic through the alignment of the trade unions and Labour Party with the Johnson government.

Stagecoach bus workers must proceed from the standpoint that their interests are incompatible with those of the corporate oligarchy and the subordination of economic and social life to its naked pursuit of profit. The only way to forge the necessary unity and coordinated fightback is through the establishment of rank-and- file committees to wage this industrial and political struggle.



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