

# UK: Unite calls off Arriva North West bus drivers strike, recommends below inflation pay offer

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Last weekend's planned all-out strike of 1,800 bus drivers at Arriva North West is the latest dispute suppressed by the Unite union. Unite called off the walkout at the last minute and recommended accepting the company's offer, equating to a real-term pay cut.

Workers at Arriva depots in Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Cheshire in the northwest of England were set to walk out on Saturday after rejecting a 2 percent pay rise—with CPI inflation at 3.1 percent and RPI (including housing costs) at almost 5 percent. On Friday afternoon Unite and the company announced a still below inflation offer of 3 percent, which the union was recommending its members accept.

With the offer already outstripped by inflation, Unite knows that a ballot of its members could see it thrown out, hence union regional officer Alison Spencer-Scragg saying, "Unite's members will now decide if it meets their aspirations."

Drivers told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Saturday that the deal also has strings attached. It eliminates bonus pay for working Saturday afternoons, meaning for many drivers it is *worse* than the offer rejected last week.

The anger of transport workers who have worked throughout the pandemic, as firms have held down pay for years, has led to a wave of votes to strike. In response the unions have expended every effort towards isolating disputes and imposing inferior company deals on pay, terms and conditions. Unite repeatedly cancelled planned strikes by tram drivers on the Greater Manchester Metrolink when the company made last-minute offers, having no intention of allowing any industrial action to go ahead. At Stagecoach bus depots nationwide, Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) have been hard at work shutting down 20 disputes.

The idea of pay parity, even within the same company,

has been abandoned. After bus drivers at Stagecoach North East voted to reject a 2 percent pay offer, Unite said, "Our members have overwhelmingly shown that they will not put up with management negotiating depot by depot in future." But the unions are integral to the divide-and-conquer approach of the bus companies. In Stagecoach's North West operations alone, Unite called off strikes after a 4.4 percent pay rise was agreed in Preston and Chorley, 3.7 percent in Greater Manchester and just 2.25 percent at Gilmoss depot in Liverpool.

Arriva drivers are also being isolated from each other. Four hundred drivers at Arriva Wales voted by 95 percent for a five-week strike, but this has been scheduled for November 14, allowing the company to direct all its attention to first imposing a rotten deal in the North West. Wales and North West England together represent less than 20 percent of Arriva's UK bus operations and it is inevitable that other workers at Arriva will be threatened with similar real-terms pay cuts.

Arriva claimed that it could not make a decent pay offer since "bus passenger levels remains [sic] lower than pre-COVID levels." However, Arriva's parent company, Deutsche Bahn (DB), says in a financial report on its UK bus operations that in the first half of 2021, "Revenue losses [due to the pandemic] were more than offset by higher government support payments."

While the company reported losses in 2020, it made an overall profit in 2019 and paid out £47.5 million in dividends to investors. DB's 2021 report notes, "Demand has been recovering since March 2021", and that "Recovery has begun".

Defeating this divide-and-conquer agenda, unifying transport workers throughout the UK and the nearly 25,000 at Arriva operations worldwide, and appealing to the wider working class, is anathema to Unite who claim

that all that is required is corporatist appeals to the company to “negotiate in good faith.”

Workers at one Arriva North West depot in Liverpool told WSWS reporters that Unite had not even called a mass meeting to find out what its members wanted in the current dispute. Many expressed disappointment that the strike had been called off at the last minute. Drivers raised the issue of working conditions, which Unite has left out of its negotiations. One described the appalling lack of toilet facilities, with only one toilet available in the town centre, and no toilet at all at the other end of his route.

While the lifting of all restrictions on the spread of COVID-19 since the reopening of the economy on July 19 has been good news for Arriva’s balance sheet, it has meant further deteriorations in safety and working conditions for drivers. Many have worked right through the pandemic, for nearly two years, and have suffered some of the highest rates of infection and death. A driver at Arriva in Liverpool said, “All we got from the company was a letter saying thanks. I tore it up and threw it in the bin.”

Public transport workers have repeatedly attempted to wage a fight against the danger of COVID-19 but have been blocked by the unions at every turn. At the height of the first wave of the pandemic in April 2020, workers at the Arriva North West Bootle and Southport depots wrote a letter to Unite demanding it fight for adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), saying that the company was “seemingly deliberately jeopardising” their lives.

World Health Organisation advice at the time was that frequent hand washing was an effective protection, but the letter noted that there was frequently no hot water available in the Bootle depot. The drivers identified the reason workers were forced to risk their lives, as “only the company profit margin seems to be on our management’s minds.” By early April 2020, at least 47 transport workers had died of COVID, including two drivers at Arriva North West: Harry McIvor in Birkenhead and Reg Halstead at the Southport depot.

While drivers were fighting for their lives, Unite was fighting *against* providing them with protection. On April 7, 2020, Unite signed a joint letter with Transport for London and the Metroline bus company which said “routine use of PPE is not currently recommended for transport workers.”

After a London bus driver, David O’Sullivan, was sacked by Metroline in February for asserting his and his colleagues’ right to safety at work, Unite submitted evidence against him at a disciplinary hearing.

Drivers can expect even more ruthless attacks on their conditions from Arriva. The number of bus drivers fell significantly throughout the pandemic, as dangerous conditions, poor pay and long hours led many to leave the industry. DB reports that Arriva’s bus operations employed 1,200 fewer people in the middle of 2021 than in 2020, and the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK estimates that there are over 4,000 vacancies for bus and coach drivers. Many bus drivers have decided that they can get better pay driving lorries.

The return to full services with reduced staffing levels means bus drivers will face the threat of longer hours and forced overtime. Defeating these attacks requires learning the lessons of previous defeats and understanding the role of the unions as corporatist partners of management. Socialist Equality Party members spoke to Arriva drivers about Unite’s role in imposing a sellout contract on Go North West bus drivers earlier this year, following an 11 week strike. One driver replied, “Sounds about right, Unite stitching someone up,” and added, “They’re all mates” [Unite and management].

A successful strategy for the working class requires a break with the corporatist unions, which are totally subordinated the interests of management, and the formation of workers’ own organisations. The Socialist Equality Party will lend every assistance to workers in forming rank-and-file committees to fight in defence of their lives, conditions and pay.



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