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UK Arriva North West driver reports brutal working conditions, as Unite union tries to push through below inflation pay deal

Our reporter
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The *World Socialist Web Site* was contacted by a bus driver employed by Arriva North West, where the Unite union has just called off a strike for the second time to recommend a below-inflation pay rise. He spoke anonymously on working conditions for bus drivers, the details of the new offer recommended by Unite, and the role of the unions.

In his first email exchange, the driver said of the WSWs previous coverage, “Whoever wrote it was brilliant. It said the truth from start to finish. I hope you continue to cover the story as we voted overwhelming to strike Monday.”

No sooner had the email arrived had Unite called off Monday’s strike on the basis of proposing a new pay offer little different from that made and rejected late last week of a three percent pay rise and time-and-a-quarter weekend rate for working Saturdays.

The driver said of that offer, “It was just a kick in the teeth really, because you haven’t really gained anything. You’ve got 39p. The three percent works out at 39p per hour, and the extra Saturday enhancement is 39p on whatever it was before.

“All they offered, effectively, is £20 on a Saturday before tax. At the end of the day, yes it’s £20. But you think of the grief you’re taking on a Saturday anyway, for 20 quid! As for the extra 39p during the week, if you work that out, it’s £14 a week, by the time you’ve taxed it, it’s under £10, by the time you look at National Insurance going up next year it will cost £157, then you’ve got fuel, council tax—you won’t even

cover the extra expenditure. You’re earning more, but effectively getting less!

“People just have to do the maths. Effectively, after all the things have been taken out, you’re left with about £6 a week. About a pound a day.”

Asked why Unite had recommended yet another below-inflation deal to bus workers, he replied, “Your guess is as good as mine. The notice just says ‘3 percent with an enhancement all-day Saturday from January 1. We are recommending this deal.’

“People are leaving the company left, right and centre, so it doesn’t matter however much you pay, there’s not enough people to do the job. And the ones that stay are now struggling to cope because they’re having to take more of the flak because there simply aren’t enough drivers. It’s now more about terms and conditions than it is about money. I think this is the general consensus among drivers.

“As you raised in your article, a big problem is toilet facilities. There’s one duty we do at night that’s eight trips, but there’s no access to toilet facilities for that driver.”

The overcrowding of buses and lack of protection from aggressive passengers was a major issue. “You’re on a timetable that’s totally unrealistic. You’re picking up a full busload of passengers in only three stops. Then you’re getting abuse from passengers because the bus that should be in front has no driver.”

With the economy fully reopened, social distancing rules on buses have been totally abandoned. The driver

said, “You’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t, because the company says you can carry however many the ticket machine says, and that’s what you’ve got to do. But people get on, they yell at you because the bus is full, but then the other two behind you are full. What do you do? you just take the abuse.

“The level of abuse out there now, I’ve never experienced in all my years what I get now. Because it’s the way society is. It’s you, one person in a seat, versus 70 people. You can’t do it. There’s no revenue inspectors any more. It’s literally you. That’s it.

“Some nights, you sit there and think ‘I’m earning £13.11 an hour to get abused. I can go to a warehouse and haul a box around for almost the same money and the box isn’t going to argue back.

“Years ago, when I first started, it was a delight! You didn’t have any security screens, you interacted with people. Now, you don’t know what they’re going to do. And now you are treated like the lowest form of scum that there is. That is how I would say most drivers view it.

“Nobody from Arriva, or Stagecoach, or whoever, has ever said ‘let’s just have a meeting with some people and get their viewpoint.’ They give you the silly questionnaires every year to find out what you think of them, but that doesn’t address the everyday issues, does it?

“At the end of the day, what are the unions doing about it? A lot of people would say that to you, ‘What are the unions actually doing now?’. Don’t get me wrong, they defend you *to a degree*. But how they do it now is—and I don’t understand it—that you’d have to go down grievance procedures and all the rest of it. It’s just not worth the effort. At the end of the day, you’re going to get in the bus tomorrow, somebody’s going to swear at you, and that’s just your norm.

“I never used to be a union man, I was never socialist, left-wing, right-wing, whatever you’d call it. But now, I look at the world and think, maybe I’ve been going wrong somewhere along the line.”

The driver confirmed what other Arriva drivers have told the WSWS, including that Unite had not called a single meeting for its members to have their say on the negotiations. “I haven’t heard of any member/union meeting, it’s always just been Arriva, and Unite and GMB. It’s all been behind closed doors. Now we have a notice saying, ‘this is what we recommend.’ But me

personally, I’m rejecting it, because I don’t agree with it.”

Asked what he thought of the company offering only 3 percent and claiming the pandemic meant they couldn’t afford more, he replied, “This is where your article really was far better than the BBC, the *Liverpool Echo*, it was actually telling the truth. You quoted details about the profits of Arriva, because the government have been subsidising Arriva, which we all knew anyway. So, they’re sitting pretty on their money, they haven’t lost out. Most drivers are bringing in excess of three or four hundred pounds in revenue a night: this company’s not losing money. The rumour has it that Arriva management just got a fantastic pay award for working through the pandemic. I got sod all.

“I worked all through it. I turned up every single day, I stayed away from my family. I didn’t get anything. They didn’t say to me, ‘Here’s 200 quid, thanks very much, we appreciate it.’ We didn’t even get that! What does that tell you? Sorry if I’m not a company man.”



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