

Stagecoach faces further strike action across England and Wales

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The UK's largest private bus, coach and tram operator Stagecoach is facing further strike action by drivers across its network.

- Stagecoach North East: On Monday this week around 200 bus drivers and depot staff in Hartlepool and Stockton on Tees took the first of twelve days of rolling strike action until December 4.

- Stagecoach South Wales: After 10 days of strike action around 200 drivers are set to take continuous strike action from November 17 until January 10.

Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) have so far managed to prevent 20 or more pay disputes across Stagecoach from becoming a national strike movement, including shutting down at least a half dozen.

Under the newly elected leadership of General Secretary Sharon Graham, Unite has been calling off strike action at an accelerated speed across Stagecoach to push through pay settlements below the rate of inflation.

Graham has claimed that Unite has taken on Stagecoach and won pay victories against a company it described as "Filthy Rich". In fact, not one of these settlements has secured a pay rise above the RPI rate of inflation, currently standing at 5 percent.

Unite cites this measurement of inflation, which includes housing costs, as its benchmark in campaign material. The highest yearly pay award was 4.5 percent and the lowest 2.25 percent. In addition to below inflation pay deals, Unite and the RMT have maintained pay differentials between bus drivers across the UK brought about by decades of privatisation.

The strike action in South Wales, the north east and south east of England has centred on the fight against both low pay and wage inequality.

In South Wales, drivers at garages in Brynmawr,

Cwmbran and Blackwood are among the lowest paid at Stagecoach. Their current hourly pay of £9.50 is the equivalent of the newly increased minimum wage.

Ten days of strikes by around 200 drivers at Stagecoach South Wales went ahead only after attempts by Unite to avert action through the arbitration service ACAS. In talks the company has stubbornly refused to accept the minimal £10.50 an hour increase demanded by Unite. Drivers have voted down two revised offers with strings, including reduced sick pay and unpaid meal breaks, with the company offering no more than £10.30 an hour. Stagecoach South Wales has threatened that granting £10.50 an hour would mean cuts in jobs and services.

Stagecoach is only able to hold the South Wales bus drivers to ransom because of the isolation of their dispute, after sellout pay settlements elsewhere across England and Scotland.

At Stagecoach North East, the mandate for action was 92 percent, involving depots in Newcastle, South Shields, Sunderland, Stockton and Hartlepool. Bus workers rejected a 2 percent pay offer. Bus workers across Stagecoach North East have opposed negotiating on a garage by garage basis, which has led to pay differentials between bus drivers within the same subsidiary. Unite suspended strike action at Newcastle, South Shields and Sunderland days before it was due to start to ballot on a separate revised deal.

At Stagecoach South East, drivers are due to strike at garages in Herne Bay, Folkstone and Hastings. They have rejected offers between 2.1 percent and 4.3 percent tabled for different garages. For doing the same job and working within the same subsidiary, hourly pay ranges from £11.10 to £11.67 for bus drivers.

Unite is facilitating this divide and rule strategy and has submitted no central pay demand. The company has

cited favourably the role the union has played elsewhere, hoping it can enforce another sellout.

Sussex Live quoted a Stagecoach South East representative stating that “the company has reached agreements with trade unions ‘in the vast majority of other depots across the country’, stressing ‘there is no reason why an agreement cannot be reached here in Kent and East Sussex.’”

On Monday, voting ended in a strike ballot of around 560 bus drivers in South Yorkshire. A 2.5 percent pay offer was rejected by drivers at Sheffield, Barnsley and Rotherham depots by a 97 percent majority on a 90 turnout.

The WSWS spoke with drivers at the Ecclesfield bus garage in Sheffield who expressed their disbelief and anger at the unequal and below inflation deals agreed by Unite. One driver described the union as “scabs”.

At a national level there is a bus driver shortage of at least 4,000 positions brought about by a mass exodus as bus drivers look to find alternative employment paying a living wage.

The labour shortage invests workers with major bargaining power to reverse the low wage economy established over years on the buses, which has worsened as the unions agreed to defer pay awards since the start of the pandemic.

Any attempt to reverse this legacy brings bus workers into conflict with the corporatist role of the trade unions, which prevents the mobilisation of their independent social strength against the private operators. Unite and the RMT function as an arm of Stagecoach to block strike action and bail out the private operators, so that workers can be kept on the job with longer working hours and the overturning of terms and conditions are the norm. This is all to patch up a barely functioning transport system in the hands of private owners. Bus drivers at Arriva North West who voted down by over 80 percent a second below inflation offer backed by Unite have explained that any struggle against increased workloads and unsafe working conditions is excluded by the union.

The fight for a genuine pay rise can only be waged through the development of the class struggle in opposition to the corporations and their agents in the trade union bureaucracy.

While Unite and the RMT put a gloss on below inflation pay deals and Stagecoach pleads poverty, the

company along with the other private operators has been bailed out during the pandemic by the Johnson government, with more than £10 billion in subsidies. Their profits are treated as sacred while the lives and livelihoods of bus workers who make these fortunes are treated as worthless.

Stagecoach is owned by the 14th joint richest individuals in Scotland, Sir Brian Souter and his sister Dame Ann Gloag, with a combined income of £650 million. The FTSE listed company still turned a profit of £58.4 million in the year up to May 2021. While profits were down across the country they rose in London and the company boasted that road mileage was back up to 94 percent and passenger fare revenue was 68 percent of pre-pandemic levels. It celebrated the removal of COVID restrictions in anticipation of boosting its coffers.

The vast transfer of wealth to the super-rich during the pandemic, directed by the government and state, must be opposed and used to fund decent pay, jobs and conditions for the workers who have been on the frontline keeping society functioning. The fight for these basic economic and social measures must be combined with health measures to end the pandemic through the closure of non-essential businesses and schools and the deployment of all mitigation measures to protect workers and society. This means opposing the brutal logic of capitalism placing profits over the protection of life.

This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party through the establishment of rank-and-file committees to mobilise the working class in an industrial and political counter offensive.



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