

Unite suspends strikes at Stagecoach across UK to roll out unequal pay deals

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Unite the union suspended strike action by hundreds of bus drivers and depot workers this week against Stagecoach, the largest private bus operator in the UK.

Bus workers in the north-east and south-east of England had voted overwhelmingly for strike action, rejecting below inflation pay offers.

A central focus of the disputes was a striving to reverse unequal pay between garages as a vital component of a genuine wage increase. Unite and its General Secretary Sharon Graham had fraudulently attempted to identify with this sentiment.

Unite's press release on the Stagecoach North East pay dispute had stated, before the ballot for strike action in September, "Stagecoach North East bosses' 'divide-and-rule' tactics on pay prompts strike ballot by drivers."

The piece explained that drivers across the subsidiary received varying degrees of low and unequal pay which they were no longer prepared to accept. The ballot produced a 92 percent mandate for action.

A total of 800 bus drivers and depot staff were due to have begun the first of 12 days of rolling strikes from this Monday, including for three days this week. Last Friday, Unite announced it was suspending action in Newcastle, South Shields and Sunderland to ballot over a revised pay offer after management at Teeside refused to negotiate collectively. This left 200 drivers and depot staff in Hartlepool and Stockton on Tees, the lowest paid in the group, to take strike action alone. The large turnouts on picket lines this week demonstrate the movement that Unite has sabotaged.

Unite and Graham then turned their attention to Stagecoach South East where more than 250 bus drivers were due to begin seven days of rolling strikes from Friday November 12. As with their colleagues in the north of England, bus drivers within the group have

been paid unequally, with Unite reporting a gap in wages between £11.10 to £11.67 per hour.

The joint strike action had been voted for by drivers opposed to the company offering different pay deals between 2.1 percent and 4.3 percent between the garages.

On Wednesday this week Unite announced that strike action had been suspended and negotiated different rates in pay agreements between the garages. Graham's media unit has attempted to detract attention from the union's betrayal of the demand for parity pay by pointing to the agreements that are above the current 5 percent rate of inflation.

Graham said, "By standing together, our members have secured much better pay offers from the company."

The agreed deals range from between 5.7 percent and 6.5 percent for bus drivers at Herne Bay and Folkstone garages. Drivers at the Hastings depot were to ballot on an offer of 5.8 percent and the divisive policy continued with Unite reporting acceptance of 5 percent in Hastings and 5.7 percent in Canterbury.

The suppression of strike action nationally has led to a situation in which the defiance by South Wales bus drivers against Stagecoach has remained isolated and the workers held at the bottom of the low-pay ladder. After 10 days of strikes the 200 bus drivers are due to launch continuous strike action from November 17. The company has refused to accede to the shabby demand presented by Unite that their minimum wage hourly rate is increased to £10.50 an hour.

The rout of Unite was completed at Kinchbus, a smaller private operator owned by the Wellglade Group based in the East Midlands. Around 50 bus drivers in Loughborough rejected a 2 percent offer and voted for 11 days of strike action between November 13 and

December 11, which the union called off on Monday. The settlement agreed different pay rates. Drivers with less than six months service will receive an 8.5 percent rise and those with longer service 5.3 percent. Senior drivers will be brought up to the top pay scale capped at £11.20 per hour with newer drivers on £11 per hour.

Unite called off the strike without the company having to increase its pay ceiling. The revised offer by Kinchbus was motivated more by the desperate shortage of drivers, which is part of a national crisis. On the same day Unite called off strike action the company published a long list of cancelled services on its Twitter page ongoing since October.

The announcement of “inflation busting” agreements at Stagecoach South East and Kinchbus is a desperate attempt to deflect mounting opposition to Graham and the Unite bureaucracy. However, thousands of Stagecoach bus drivers around the country will want to know why they were palmed off with below inflation pay deals portrayed as “victories” as strike action was cancelled.

In London, Unite has circulated documents showing that a pay increase of 9.8 percent is required based on inflation. Needless to say, Unite’s pay deals have fallen far short of this. It is currently tabling management offers of just 1.75 percent at Metrolink and 1.5 percent at Arriva South in “consultative ballots” of its shrinking membership. Any revisions above these insults will be taken as grounds for an endless cycle of ballots in a concerted effort to wind down opposition, as the experience of bus workers at Stagecoach and Arriva North West proves.

Drivers at RATP’s Stamford Brook depot report Unite is holding an “aspiration poll” to canvas views on a preferred wage increase. This insult comes six months after Unite betrayed strikes across RATP over an outstanding pay claim, ramming through sellout pay deals of between 1 and 2.5 percent.

Unite and the RMT have acted jointly to sabotage a national strike movement to enforce substandard pay agreements. These organisations are trade unions in name only. A more apt description of Unite the union would be Divide the workers.

For decades the trade unions have suppressed strikes against the private operators and agreed to new entrants receiving inferior pay, terms and conditions than senior drivers. This has served to undermine basic class unity

and allowed the overall wage level to plummet below the national average.

The demand for a genuine pay increase and parity for drivers has been shaped by the experience of the pandemic. The sectional and parochial outlook cultivated by organisations passing themselves off as trade unions is giving way to one more fundamentally rooted in a class standpoint.

The pandemic has shown that it is the working class which is critical to the functioning of society and the production of all wealth. This has been confirmed under conditions in which the basic axiom of capitalism, everything for profit, has wreaked havoc in terms of mass death and social hardship.

Unite and the RMT do not organise workers, they *demobilise* and *isolate* their struggles against the corporate oligarchy. Workers are moving into struggle as Unite and the RMT are further integrated as an extended arm of management, with their highly paid executives functioning in partnership with the private operators.

A new path of struggle must be cleared. We urge bus workers across the country to read and share the statement of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee which was published to week, “Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop exploitation.”

The statement calls for a 25 percent across the board pay increase and parity pay to reverse the historic low wages on the bus network, counteracts inflation while ensuring that bus workers do not have to exceed a 38-hour week. It rejects the claim that this is “unrealistic”, the private operators have generated millions from bus workers and have been subsidised by the Johnson government to well over £10 billion.

It joins the fight for pay with demands health measures to enforce workplace safety as part of a broader fight to end the pandemic and defend workers who speak out against victimisation, as with the test case being fought to defend David O’Sullivan.



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