

Arriva bus drivers in North Wales strike against pay restraint

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Around 400 bus drivers at Arriva Cymru in Wales began continuous strike action for five weeks on Sunday. This is the most extensive action since the build-up of pay disputes across the national bus network, which until now has centred on the largest private bus operator, Stagecoach. Arriva Cymru parent company Arriva Bus UK is another of the “Big 5” bus and transport companies.

The strike is set to run from November 14 until December 19 and involves depots in north Wales at Bangor, Amlwch, Llandudno, Rhyl and Wrexham as well as north west England at Hawarden, Chester. The strike was voted for with a 95 percent majority.

Unite the union stated in a press release last Wednesday that bus drivers had rejected a pitiful increase of 29 pence an hour and pointed to the pay differential for bus drivers at Arriva Cymru, who are paid £1.81 an hour less than their counterparts at Arriva North West across the border in England.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham issued a pro forma statement, of the type which has preceded every sellout pay agreement enforced by the union elsewhere on the buses: “Arriva Cymru have chosen not to offer their loyal Welsh workforce the pay offer they deserve. Their failure to tackle poverty pay will now result in severe disruption to bus services and the people of North Wales. Our members are united and they will receive the full backing of Unite over the next five weeks of strike action.”

Far from Unite standing by bus drivers in the fight for a genuine wage increase and equal pay, it is actively sabotaging joint action across Arriva as it has at Stagecoach over the last few months, blocking the potential for a national strike. In London, Unite has conducted a consultative ballot of its membership at Arriva South over a 1.5 percent increase, allowing the

company to present this “offer” as worthy of consideration.

For all the bluster by Graham over “fair pay”, Unite has never defined what this constitutes in terms of a UK-wide increase and parity pay, either at Arriva or Stagecoach. Only last week, Unite suspended strike action by hundreds of bus workers at Stagecoach in the northeast and southeast of England based on similar demands for equal pay. Even the demand for parity between garages in the same subsidiary has been trampled underfoot by Unite negotiating separate agreements.

If it were not for Unite, both Stagecoach and Arriva would now be faced with strike action nationally by thousands of bus drivers fighting for proper pay justice and providing a focal point for a wider fightback. The Unite bureaucracy under Graham has been working to end a list of 20 disputes at Stagecoach before the resistance spreads to Arriva and other private operators. At First Group, another member of the Big 5, drivers in Leeds and Glasgow who have been denied a pay rise for two years have also been balloting for strike action.

The role of Unite is not to *agitate* and *organise* but to *nullify* and *disorganise*.

This has involved wearing down opposition by isolating pay disputes and constantly suspending strike action to ballot over revised offers, which are only “improved” in comparison to the original derisory offers. In a vast majority of cases, this has resulted in pay agreements below the current RPI rate of inflation of 5 percent. Graham has described these outcomes as victories.

Last week, Unite finally pushed through the sellout of the pay dispute at Arriva North West by 1,800 bus drivers in Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Cheshire to enforce a below-inflation pay deal.

Unite has compared favourably the 39 pence an hour increase at Arriva North West to the 29 pence offered at Arriva Cymru. This outcome was only accepted in the teeth of workers' bitter opposition to Unite, which suspended strike action twice to enforce the rotten deal. Unite is still yet to produce a statement on the ending of the dispute and the agreement because of the widespread condemnation it knows it will evoke.

Arriva North West drivers voted down the second below-inflation pay offer of 3 percent recommended by Unite by a majority of 80 percent, with the Unite North West Facebook page inundated with angry comments identifying the union as working on behalf of the company.

Following the massive rejection of the revised offer, Unite simply re-entered backroom talks with the company. This resulted in a joint statement between Unite, Arriva and the GMB union on November 8 making clear that the union bureaucracy would prevent strike action at all costs:

“Arriva UK Bus and the trade unions Unite and GMB are please to confirm that after ongoing discussions this week, all parties have come to an agreement on a way forward which meets the aspirations of the Trade Unions and their members. All Trade Union representatives from Arriva's 10 depots in the region attended a meeting this morning to confirm their agreement and will be strongly recommending to their members that the new offer is accepted, when the new ballot takes place next week. In the meantime, it was agreed that the proposed strike action for next week is cancelled and all parties will now work together towards full resolution.”

The third revised offer was essentially the same as the previous rejected offer, with the marginal difference of the inclusion of time-and-a-quarter payment for Saturday working, paid from January. As one Arriva North West driver who wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) explained, this will leave workers no better off. Among the many comments left on the Unite North West Facebook page, another driver stated, “Unite are trying to make the company profitable at our expense.”

This sums up the entire position of Unite, not just over wages but on every critical issue from the lack of protection against COVID-19 during the pandemic to increased workloads, extended hours of work and the

overturning of terms and conditions.

The Unite bureaucracy, like all the other unions, oversees a vast apparatus aimed at suppressing the class struggle. The highly paid executives function as an industrial police force and low wage contractor on behalf of the private operators—as a corporatist syndicate.

Unite has sought to dampen down the fight over pay on the basis of what it describes as “reasonable” settlements. Such language is meant to enforce the notion that there is common ground between the interests of workers and the private operators, in order to stifle the fight that must be waged.

Arriva Bus UK's parent company is Deutsche Bahn (DB). The WSWS has shown how DB has reported that its loss in passenger revenue during the pandemic has been offset by government subsidies and stated that a recovery has begun in its financial report for 2021. Three members of its board have awarded themselves a 10 percent raise for 2023, including CEO Richard Lutz whose salary is set to increase from €900,000 to €1 million.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee has issued a statement calling for a serious fight for pay and an end to sweatshop exploitation. The demand it advances for a 25 percent pay increase across the board is based on reversing the decades-long attack on bus workers' living standards, and not accepting only what the private operators deem acceptable to guarantee the continued flow of profits into their coffers. In opposition to the divide and rule policy of the pro-company unions, the Committee states:

“A network of rank-and-file organisations, cutting across divisions between companies and industries, and crossing national borders, will link up the disparate struggles of bus and transport workers, break the isolation being imposed by Unite, the RMT and other unions, and unite workers into a powerful force.”



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