

Unite celebrates £1 over minimum wage rise at Stagecoach South Wales as major victory

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There is a fetid stench of desperation in the hoopla the Unite union has attempted to generate around the ending of the bitter pay dispute at Stagecoach South Wales.

Unite announced the deal had been accepted on Tuesday in a press release, “Unite achieves major victory for Stagecoach drivers with £10.50 per hour pay deal.” But to hail such a settlement as a victory in the fight against the “scourge of low pay” is frankly absurd.

Unite’s Tuesday press release came just one day prior to the beginning of a continuous strike by the 200 bus drivers at the three depots in South Wales; Blackwood, Brynwawr and Cwmbran. Workers had already taken 17 days of strike action against Stagecoach and its refusal to agree a meagre £10.50 an hour wage, with its previous offer of £10.30 an hour based on ending paid meals breaks and a reduction in sick pay.

Stagecoach had described increasing the hourly rate of bus drivers at the garages from the existing £9.50 an hour, equivalent to the UK minimum wage, by £1 as “unrealisable” and threatened cuts to jobs and services.

South Wales drivers paid minimum wage for a skilled, highly responsible and stressful job, have suffered most. But Stagecoach bus workers have all paid the price for the divide and rule policy of Unite. The strike at Stagecoach South Wales remained completely isolated as the union bureaucracy under General Secretary Sharon Graham overturned one strike mandate after another at Stagecoach across the UK to enforce below inflation pay agreements.

The rate of inflation now standing at 6 percent (RPI) is set to rise further. In the medium term, therefore, drivers have received a de facto pay cut at the hands of Graham, even under conditions of a major shortage of

bus drivers nationally of 4,000 which objectively strengthened workers’ hand.

The BBC cited Graham stating, “All transport operators in Wales need to recognise that we will not accept poverty pay for our members.” The article noted that Unite had the brass neck to highlight the disparity in pay of Stagecoach drivers in South Wales to those in Preston, who are paid more than £11.80 an hour and those in the South West on £12.50 an hour. The pay agreement hailed as a “shining example” of Unite therefore leaves drivers at Stagecoach South Wales at the very bottom of this low pay ladder.

The local *South Wales Argus* could not bring itself to regurgitate Unite’s triumphalism, writing with obvious and intended irony that “A TRADE unions says its members have ‘won’ a pay dispute with bus firm Stagecoach after reaching an agreement on a new pay deal”. The article cited a representative for Stagecoach stating that Unite has agreed to productivity strings.

Comments from its readers who were among the most supportive of the strike action taken by the 200 drivers challenged the official narrative of Unite.

· “10.50 an hour is nowhere near enough pay. I’m an ex Bus/Coach driver. Should be at least £13 an hour.”

· “And what many of these people don’t realise is that £10.50 per hour still means that many drivers and other staff will need to claim benefits to top up their pay to subsistence levels..”

· “‘Improvements in productivity’—that sounds like Unite have agreed to make their members work harder for the money—and if they don’t meet that’ll mean redundancies.”

The official Unite press release declaring “victory” drew a no less critical response from bus drivers. The Facebook group of Bus Drivers in London followed by more than a 3,000 included the following comments:

· “Victory ACHIEVED for the national minimum wage CONGRATULATIONS folks..”

· “Race to the bottom”

There is still more to uncover about the rotten deal agreed at Stagecoach South Wales. On its face an increase for one year would be 10.5 percent (of not very much!) but a bus driver on Unite Wales Facebook page noted that it is for *two years*. This already brings it down to 5.1 percent (of not very much!) The WSWS approached the Unite press office to clarify this but has received no reply.

Unite has in addition agreed concessions, with the press release citing the achievement of “many of the goals set out by our members”, (i.e., not all), and successfully pushing back “against cuts to sick pay for some of the longest serving staff,” (i.e., not for everyone).

According to Stagecoach, the pay agreement reached is indeed based on a two-year settlement, which includes productivity strings. Managing director of Stagecoach South Wales, Nigel Winter, told the *South Wales Argus*, ‘We’re pleased that through flexibility on both sides, and improvements in productivity, we have reached an agreement that achieves these aims through until April 2023 and that will bring an end to any further strike action.”

The company will be demanding its pound of flesh from bus drivers with the full blessing of Unite. A unified front of bus workers at Stagecoach and across all the bus companies would stand in the way of the continued collaboration between the union bureaucracy and private operators aimed at establishing new benchmarks of exploitation.

Graham was elected in August claiming that Unite would do what it said on the trade union tin and “defend jobs, pay and conditions.” It has taken a few months for this to be shown up as a farce. Graham has presided over possibly the highest number of strikes suspended by any Unite leader in such a short period, under conditions in which its one million plus membership has suffered an unprecedented reversal of their pay and terms and conditions and been exposed to the murderous response of the British ruling class during the pandemic to place profits over lives.

This career union bureaucrat without any genuine popular support among workers has relied upon the services rendered by the pseudo-left Socialist Party and

Socialist Workers Party, who supported and hailed her election as the supposed “Workers Candidate.” This was a desperate bid to proclaim a left reforming section of the union bureaucracy against the growth of a rank-and-file rebellion. The SP and SWP provided this service while drawing a veil over the major betrayal in May of the 11 week strike by Go North West bus drivers in Manchester against fire and rehire, directly overseen by Graham. They allowed her to cite it on it on her CV of so-called victories brought about by her “leverage” strategy.

Speaking with bus drivers across Stagecoach the common sentiment expressed to the WSWS is that they should all be out together and fighting for the same goals—above inflation and parity pay. Unite has still to report on the outcome of the ballot which closed on November 8 of 560 bus drivers at Stagecoach in South Yorkshire at garages in Sheffield, Barnsley and Rotherham. Last Saturday, drivers in Barnsley reported that they had voted for strike action, which they understood should be taking place from November 27. Drivers described the deals struck by Unite elsewhere at Stagecoach as “abysmal” and complained that Unite “is splitting us up”, with one driver anticipating that many would resign from the union.

The bitter experiences at Stagecoach, now being repeated at Arriva Bus UK have confirmed that no genuine fight can be waged so long as the resistance of bus workers remains in the grip of the pro-company bureaucracy under Graham. It is time to turn to the formation of a network of rank-and-file committees to take forward a genuine fightback. We urge bus workers to read and share the statement issued by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee “Organise a Fightback for higher wages End sweatshop exploitation” and build this movement.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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