

Unite’s “new and improved offer” at Arriva North Wales: another *de facto* pay cut

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The Unite union has announced a new pay offer from Arriva Wales and suspended a strike by 400 bus drivers on the fifth day of what scheduled to be a five-week stoppage. This is another of Unite’s choreographed betrayals that begin with militant rhetoric before suspending strikes to ballot on below-inflation pay offers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Arriva drivers in North Wales to vote down the wretched pay deal concocted between Unite and the company. Announced last Thursday, the ballot in the run-up to Christmas is intended to wear workers down until they accept a company contract.

Arriva’s proposal, presented by Unite as a “new and improved pay offer,” is an insult to bus workers who have risked their lives throughout the pandemic. While pleading poverty in negotiations, the company recently reported to investors that any revenue lost due to the pandemic was “more than offset by higher government support payments.”

Unite initially claimed it was fighting for pay parity, a cause that resonates strongly with drivers. Referring to a £2.20 wage difference between Arriva’s drivers in Wales and North West England, Unite declared, “Welsh workers are not willing to accept inferior terms and conditions to their colleagues in other parts of the UK.” In reality, Unite presides over unequal and poverty-level wage rates across the bus industry.

Recent disputes across Stagecoach sites provided the perfect opportunity for united action. But Unite divided workers region-by-region, blocking a national strike, even as disputes were brewing at other major bus operators.

Drivers at Arriva North West voted to accept a miserly 3 percent pay deal recommended by Unite and GMB only after it became clear the unions were intent

on sabotaging workers’ efforts to strike. The unions twice called off walkouts to ballot on last-minute company offers, the first of which was *worse* than a deal already rejected by members.

Pay parity was a demand that resonated across Arriva groups, with a driver at a Merseyside depot telling the WSWS, “There should be a national wage for bus drivers; we all do the same job.” This was blocked by Unite when it settled at Arriva North West in advance of the strike in Wales.

Unite’s official statements about negotiations at Arriva Wales were vague, but one branch secretary admitted to local newspaper *The Leader*, “Our counterparts in the north west of England have just accepted a pay deal, which was three per cent. We want the same pay deal, but they’ve only offered us 2.5 per cent and are refusing to budge.” With Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation at 6 percent, and even the headline Consumer Prices Index (CPI) inflation rate shooting up from 3.1 percent in September to 4.2 percent in October, the 3 percent offer forced through in the North West represents a huge pay cut in real terms. No genuine workers’ organisation would go into negotiations asking for drivers to be substantially worse off!

North Wales Live reported Unite sent a letter to members which said the deal increased annual pay by £1,251 over two years. This is miles away from achieving pay parity even with Arriva North West. It is an approximately 3 percent increase per year, leaving the gap almost unchanged from before the two disputes.

Only one day before suspending the Arriva Wales strike, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham felt obliged to state that “a pay deal at the level of CPI is a real terms wage cut.” Yet her union’s pay deals with Arriva North West and many Stagecoach groups are in

fact *even lower* than CPI inflation.

The enthusiastic response of many drivers for a struggle for pay parity and growing disgust with Unite's pro-company actions points to the need for new organisations that will *unite, not divide* workers.

North West drivers tried spreading the word about the impending betrayal, with comments on Unite's Facebook pages asking, "Are you going to tell them [Arriva Wales drivers] to accept a pathetic 3% like their colleagues in north west?" Others warned that drivers in Wales would "Probably get sold down the river (mersey) like everyone else." One sarcastically referred to Unite's silence over its role at Arriva North West: "Just wondering when Unite are going to put something up about the big pay deal that they managed to get for all the drivers on Merseyside."

Bus drivers are being blocked from fighting by trade unions which support the company's "right" to make a profit at their expense. In the recent strike by 200 bus drivers at Stagecoach South Wales, Unite celebrated a "victory" which left drivers on just £10.50. They not only remain on wages lower than other Stagecoach groups *and* Arriva Wales, but the pay increase was spread over two years, making it lower than RPI inflation. This real-terms pay cut also came with concessions which increase "productivity" i.e., boosting exploitation.

Despite Sharon Graham's proclamation that Unite would "return to the workplace" and would give "no more blank cheques" to Labour, it has continued to promote Labour and subordinate workers to its pro-capitalist programme. The Facebook page for Unite Wales still proudly proclaims that it works with the devolved Welsh Labour-run government, which has presided over miserable pay and conditions for bus drivers for over 20 years.

Unite promoted calls by Labour members of the Senedd during the Arriva Wales dispute for Arriva to "get back around the table." Jack Sargeant demagogically cited Thatcher's 1985 privatisation of the bus industry, but in the decades since, Labour has refused to reverse any of it. Labour have led the Welsh government for over two decades, and despite transport being devolved have allowed private operators to make hay while paying drivers poverty wages.

Welsh Labour's new plans for bus franchising will further these attacks. Labour Deputy Minister Lee

Waters told the Senedd outright, "We encourage a spirit of social partnership." This corporatist agenda means companies dictate and the unions become further incorporated into management to enforce what the company wants.

Arriva drivers and other bus workers must reject the appeals for "social partnership," which only serves the company's drive for profits at the expense of wages, conditions and safety. The pandemic has shown that Tory and Labour politicians and their defenders in the unions hold the right to profit above even the right to life. An independent network of rank-and-file committees is needed to link workers across depots, industries and national borders in a common fight.



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