

Stagecoach Yorkshire UK bus drivers launch a week of strike action

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26 November 2021

Around 560 bus drivers at Stagecoach Yorkshire are set to begin seven days of continuous strikes this weekend at garages in Rotherham, Barnsley and Sheffield in South Yorkshire.

The members of Unite were balloted for strike action closing November 8, but the union has buried the dispute for weeks as it has enforced sell out agreements elsewhere, not just at Stagecoach but Arriva Bus UK.

Stagecoach originally faced 20 pay disputes across the UK, which would have resulted in national strike action bringing the network of the largest private bus and coach operator in the UK to a standstill.

The rash of pay disputes is the product of a renewed militancy in response to the pandemic, in which official praise for key workers has clashed with the harsh reality of working in an unsafe environment and the imposition of intolerable working conditions for low pay. The spiralling cost of living with inflation now standing at over 6 percent was the final straw.

In keeping with its drive to demobilise mounting resistance, Unite delayed any public announcement of the vote for strike action at South Yorkshire, which it described as “overwhelming.” This was to pursue backroom talks with the company which has remained rigid over its insulting 2 percent offer following a pay freeze implemented last year with the agreement of Unite.

Strike action was only confirmed by Unite on Wednesday. While bus drivers at the three garages were balloted together over a pay claim, the union is already undermining a joint struggle by deciding on separate action.

Bus drivers at the garages in Barnsley and Rotherham will strike from Saturday, 27 November until Sunday, December 3, action in Sheffield will run from Sunday, 28 November until Saturday, December 4.

Unite’s November 24 press release was headlined, “Stagecoach poverty pay offer forces South Yorkshire bus drivers to strike.” Far from a rallying cry it was more a statement of regret for taking strike action against a company the union has described as “Filthy Rich.”

Unite does not intend to mount any genuine opposition. General Secretary Sharon Graham states, “Unite is pledged to fight for the jobs pay and conditions of our members so we will be relentless in the campaign to ensure that our members at Stagecoach, in South Yorkshire, get a fair deal.”

Bus drivers at Stagecoach Yorkshire are already beginning to draw the conclusion that Unite will do no such thing, describing pay settlements elsewhere at Stagecoach as “abysmal” and criticising the union for “splitting them up.”

Unite’s press release was framed to counteract mounting discontent. Rather than draw a true balance sheet over the fight against pay restraint at Stagecoach, it cherry picks the rare exceptions of agreements which on face value exceed the inflation rate. There is no reference to the *de facto* pay cuts which have predominated as a result of its overturning of strike mandates across the UK, including 3.7 percent in Greater Manchester and as low as 2.25 percent in Liverpool.

It only refers to a minority of pay deals “secured” by Unite in other areas of the country of “6.5 per cent, 7.5 per cent and even 10.5 per cent.” Unite does not include in these highly selective examples the pay settlement it hailed only a month ago as a “tremendous victory” in neighbouring Derbyshire, at Chesterfield bus garage, of 4.5 percent as this was another *de facto* pay cut.

Unite does not identify the specific Stagecoach

subsidiaries at which above inflation agreements apply, but taking the figures cited, two examples indicate how they are presented them in an entirely misleading way.

• **10.5 percent at Stagecoach South Wales.** Over 200 drivers based in three depots took 17 days of staggered strike action. The agreement was accepted one day prior to launching continuous strike action. Unite celebrated an increase to £10.50 an hour, just £1 above the minimum wage. This was a two year, not one year agreement, bringing it down to just over 5 percent. It included productivity strings and the reduction of sick pay for some workers.

• **6.5 percent at Stagecoach South East.** This refers to a single garage in Folkestone. Unite agreed to different pay settlements for the five garages in Kent and Sussex, with the lowest at Ramsgate of 5 percent. This was reached after Unite suspended rolling strike action by 250 bus drivers across the subsidiary, who demanded parity pay.

Unite sabotaged the fight for parity pay at Stagecoach South East only days after it did exactly the same at Stagecoach North East in the second week of November. It suspended strike action across the subsidiary by 800 bus workers to leave the lowest paid garages in Teeside, 200 drivers at Stockton and Hartlepool, to take strike action alone.

The pay settlement Unite has agreed in Teeside after four days of strike action was described by Graham as a “significant result” rather than a victory, while still claiming that it met bus drivers’ expectations. Unite’s press release refers to an 8.5 percent increase paid in “several stages” over 10 months. It accepts a different rate of pay for drivers with less than one year of service.

In relation to parity pay with other garages in the subsidiary in Newcastle and Sunderland, this only covers some drivers and depot staff and will take 6 years!

“From December 2022 all top rate drivers, duty managers and inspectors will receive 20 pence (sic) increase to ensure parity is achieved with pay rates at the Sunderland depot within five years.”

Unite remained tight lipped about the pay settlements agreed elsewhere at Stagecoach North East among the drivers who had voted to strike alongside their co-workers on Teeside, with a footnote stating, “A similar dispute involving Unite members employed by

Stagecoach on Tyneside was resolved without the need for industrial action.”

The closing down of strike action has prevented workers from achieving their goals collectively for reversing low wages and establishing equal pay for all. The undermining of this struggle has been to reinforce the corporatist relations between Unite and Stagecoach by blocking a broader opposition to the new benchmarks for increased workloads and longer hours demanded by the private operators. The prioritisation of profits over workers’ lives has been most brutally expressed in the high proportion of deaths from COVID-19 among drivers nationally, concentrated in London with the death of 70 bus workers.

The precondition for waging a fight against the bus companies is a break from the entire apparatus of Unite through the establishment of rank-and-file committees, genuine organisations of workers struggle, which will forge links between the garages and across the entire network. Drivers must reject the claim by the unions that workers’ interests can be reconciled to those of the corporate oligarchy, whether it is Stagecoach, Arriva Bus UK, First Group or any other private operator. This is the strategy outlined in the statement issued by the London Bus Rank and File Committee “Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop exploitation.”



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