

Unite union sells out Arriva Wales dispute

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On Monday, the Unite union made yet another fraudulent claim of “victory”, this time over the issue of pay parity for bus drivers after forcing through another company deal. After voting by 95 percent in favour of a five-week strike last month, drivers at Arriva Wales found their strike suspended for two weeks to ballot on a deal recommended by Unite.

This deal, which passed by an unspecified margin when it was clear Unite would negotiate nothing better, leaves untouched the regional divisions used by the bus operators to drive down pay and conditions.

Unite’s press release celebrating the deal is dishonest from start to finish. The only information reads, “The new deal achieves Unite’s aim of securing an hourly rate of £12 an hour for its members.”

Left out is the fact that drivers will not be on this rate until April next year. Wrexham newspaper *The Leader* reported the full details of the pay rise, which involves a backdated increase from £11.30 to £10.40 between January 2021 and March 2021, and then a rate of £11.64 until the £12 rate is reached in April 2022.

Over its two-year term the deal works out as a year-on-year pay increase of 3.05 percent—barely above the 3 percent deal imposed at Arriva North West after Unite repeatedly blocked strike action. The admission that the £12 rate was Unite’s *aim* is damning, given that the union repeatedly implied it was fighting for pay parity between Arriva drivers in Wales and the North West region of England, where the basic rate is around £13.50.

In November, Unite declared, “Welsh workers are not willing to accept inferior terms and conditions to their colleagues in other parts of the UK.”

Drivers responded enthusiastically to a fight for pay parity, leaving comments on social media and telling *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that they support a national pay rate for bus drivers. Unite posted a speech by a Labour parliamentarian on its social media pages

and highlighted the quote, “It simply cannot be fair that workers in Wales are paid less and made to work longer hours than their counterparts just across the border in England.” Yet this is exactly what the new deal perpetuates!

The deal exposes the claim by Unite’s General Secretary Sharon Graham in November that she would negotiate real-terms pay increases, when she wrote “in fact a pay deal at the level of CPI [Consumer Price Index inflation] is a real terms wage cut.”

The latest Office for National Statistics figures show CPI inflation is 3.8 percent when housing costs were included, so the deal pushed through by Unite is not at the level of CPI, but *below* it, and far below Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation which is 6 percent.

Different working conditions across Arriva groups have also been left intact by the deal, which concerns only pay. In comments to *ITV News*, one Unite official reported that Arriva North West drivers have a 37 hour week, while drivers in Wales work 39 hours. A former Arriva driver criticised the deal on Facebook for leaving drivers at Arriva Wales with no time-and-a-quarter payment on Saturday, which is paid all day at Arriva North West.

This former driver came under attack by Unite’s regional officer Jo Goodchild, who replied, “[W]hat a complete load of nonsense. Please don’t involve yourself with issues you have no knowledge of.” She followed up by saying that “you are no longer employed by Arriva therefore are not party to the aspirations of the membership that were relayed to me,” as if workers had *asked* to receive a below-inflation rise and remain on worse terms than other drivers in the same company.

Another poster summed up Goodchild’s argument as “you’re not paying subs anymore so zip it.”

The former driver himself replied by pointing to the numerous comments from current drivers at Arriva

Wales who said they *were* fighting to be on the same pay as drivers in England and posted a video of a Wrexham Unite rep making this same demand.

Many other people took to social media to criticise the deal and support pay parity between bus drivers. Under news articles about the end of the strike, comments included, “Unless it’s equal pay, you’ve sold yourselves out” and “Still a poor pay offer considering inflation and future NI [national insurance contribution] increases.” One post explained that, as workers need the extra money when Christmas approaches, “The sweetener [about £575 in back pay] coming up to Christmas probably got that deal through. It’s buttons”.

Other posts pointed out that it wasn’t just Unite selling out workers, but all the trade unions. Reflecting the sellouts of bus drivers by Unite, GMB and the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT), a commenter wrote, “Sold down the river by the unions again”.

One spoke to the experiences of masses of workers: “I suppose the union bureaucrats have come up with a crappy deal with their boss mates that the drivers have been pressured into accepting” and concluded “unions aren’t our friends, they are friends of gaffers, just mini-gaffers themselves and in suits as well, that WE pay for like everything through our work”.

There is no sellout so blatant, and no pay rate so miserly, that Unite will not celebrate it as a “victory”. Graham announced a “tremendous victory” last month after ending a 17-day strike at Stagecoach South Wales with a new pay rate of £10.50 per hour. In October, Unite issued a press release announcing it was “determined to eradicate low pay for bus workers once and for all.” This same release boasted of a pay deal which saw Stagecoach drivers at Gilmoor depot in Liverpool receive a 2.25 percent rise, and a new rate of £9.50 per hour for cleaners—exactly the minimum wage announced in the Tory government’s budget two weeks later.

Unite may be winning victories, but not for the workers. The unions have long since fought for the interests of the employers against those of their members, working hard in every dispute to demonstrate their value in keeping workers’ anger from harming profits.

Despite Graham’s promise of “no more blank

cheques” for the Labour Party, telling workers to take no independent action remains a key part of Unite’s anti-worker strategy. Unite’s announcement it had achieved all its aims came with a call for the Labour-run Welsh Government to “introduce a system of sectoral bargaining.” Unite then goes on to claim, “Through this we can work to end the continuous race to the bottom which has driven down pay rates over the years.” These same unions and Labour Party have accepted the artificial division of bus workers’ pay and conditions across companies and regions for decades.

It is only with the help of the unions that the bus companies have been saved from the anger of workers whose lives, and those of their families, were endangered in the name of corporate profits. The phrase, “I worked through the pandemic and got nothing” is on the mind of millions, while companies like Arriva boast of *increased* revenue due to government handouts. This anger must find conscious expression through the building of new organisations linking bus workers across companies in a fight for improved pay and safe conditions across the board.



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