

Stagecoach Yorkshire bus drivers in UK reject revised pay deal and launch second week-long strike

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Around 560 bus drivers and depot staff at Stagecoach Yorkshire are on a second week-long strike against pay restraint. This follows a seven-day strike a week ago by the bus workers at garages in Rotherham, Barnsley and Sheffield in South Yorkshire.

Rotherham and Barnsley began their action last Saturday while the strike in Sheffield started Sunday. The garages were balloted together but Unite the union has staggered start dates as it did previously.

The militant mood among drivers who regard their action as part of a united battle for pay parity and a genuine wage increase has been evident on the picket lines in South Yorkshire. Their determination to resist any deal which does not meet the rising cost of living—inflation is at 6 percent—was signalled by their vote rejecting a revised pay offer from Stagecoach Yorkshire last Friday.

Unite provided an update on its Twitter page to confirm strike action would proceed, reporting that the proposals were “overwhelmingly” rejected. But it has not disclosed the contents of the revised offer or countered the claims by Stagecoach that it was an “inflation busting” deal.

The company is favourably citing agreements it has reached with Unite across its UK network to end pay disputes. Stagecoach Yorkshire bus workers should view this as a warning. The company is using the record of rotten deals agreed by Unite against workers’ continued defiance.

Managing Director Phil Medlicott stated, “Our people play a key role in supporting their communities and we remain 100 percent committed to reaching an agreement with the union as Stagecoach has done at depots elsewhere across the country including locally in

Chesterfield.”

The 4.5 percent pay agreement at Chesterfield was made possible after Unite and the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT) suspended strike action in October and promoted the de facto pay cut as a victory. Stagecoach Yorkshire workers rejected a similar offer in November to launch their strike action, but the company is equally dependent on Unite to isolate and close down their opposition.

Stagecoach Yorkshire has packaged the latest revised offer, paid in two instalments, as a 9 percent increase in six months. However, according to bus workers, this covers a period of 15 months. This in no way compensates for the pay freeze imposed last year. Workers on the picket line at Rawmarsh garage in Rotherham explained the revised offer would leave them worse off. The top rate of hourly pay for a bus driver at the garage is just £10.80 an hour, with no enhanced pay for bank holidays, weekends or lates.

One driver explained, “The revised offer equates to an increase of £980 when we need £1,700 just to stand still in terms of inflation and increased National Insurance contributions next year. The pay proposals were for 3 percent from February to August of this year with a further 6 percent to 2022, with our anniversary pay date pushed back from February to May.

“We are fed up. We are not here for the union or company, we are fighting for a living wage. We are not asking for the earth. We know Stagecoach is making profits.”

Unite originally entered national negotiations with Stagecoach in January on a pay claim of RPI + 1 percent. This was rejected by the company, which came back with derisory offers of around 1 percent and 2

percent.

Unite has proved indispensable to the company in blocking a unified fightback. It has spent the last months ensuring that 20 pay disputes across Stagecoach were not integrated into one fight against the largest private bus and coach operator in the UK.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has hailed one below-inflation pay deal after another as a victory at Stagecoach after strike action was suspended across the UK. Where the union was unable to prevent a strike, it ensured action remained isolated and a sell-out deal followed, as with Stagecoach South Wales.

Around 200 bus drivers at three garages mounted 17 days of strike action against their status as among the lowest-paid across the company. The 10.5 percent increase deal secured is below the rate of inflation. It is a two-year deal that included productivity strings and has left drivers on a miserly £10.50 an hour. This is the real record of Unite on ending poverty pay.

Unite has trampled underfoot the fight for pay parity at Stagecoach North East and South East, enshrining different wage levels between garages and between subsidiaries.

Graham has been speaking out of both sides of her mouth. Unite has run a publicity campaign against the company as “Filthy Rich” while ensuring Stagecoach does not have to part with the profits it has reaped from the workers who have kept its services running during the pandemic.

While Stagecoach pleads poverty, it announced last week a massive increase in profits of 104.3 percent in the six months to October, £32.9 million compared with £16.1 million in the same period last year.

Passenger numbers were up to over 70 percent of pre-pandemic levels after the company celebrated the ending of all mitigation measures back in July. Stagecoach, along with other private operators, still benefits from a government COVID-19 subsidy, which in England alone is worth £8 million per week and continues until next April, after receiving £10 billion in handouts already.

The divide and conquer tactics by Stagecoach against the emerging resistance of bus drivers have been enforced by the Unite bureaucracy under Graham. The same playbook has been followed by Unite at Arriva Bus UK, with the union blocking or ending strikes based on pay agreements half the rate of inflation at just

3 percent.

The precondition for waging any fight against the bus companies is a break from the apparatus of Unite through the establishment of rank-and-file committees, genuine organisations of workers’ struggle, which will forge links between garages and across the entire transport network. Drivers must reject the claim by the unions that workers’ interests can be reconciled to those of the corporate oligarchy, whether Stagecoach, Arriva Bus UK, First Group, or any other private operator.

The fight against poverty pay must be linked to the demand for emergency health measures to combat a resurgent pandemic with the Omicron variant spreading rapidly. The Labour Party and trade unions are once again leaving the working class defenceless as they prop up the Johnson government’s herd immunity policy that has already claimed up to 170,000 lives in the UK. Workers’ safety and livelihoods must be prioritised over the profits of the corporations and big business. This is the strategy outlined by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee in its statement, “Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop exploitation.”



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