

UK: Stagecoach Yorkshire bus workers to take indefinite strike from New Year

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Stagecoach bus drivers and depot staff in South Yorkshire, England are set to take indefinite strike action from New Year's Day in an escalation of their pay dispute against the UK's largest bus operator.

This follows two rounds of week-long strike action since the end of November at Stagecoach Yorkshire by more than 500 members of Unite at the three garages in Rotherham, Barnsley and Sheffield. The strike will begin on January 1 in Rotherham and Barnsley and January 2 in Sheffield.

The vote for indefinite action was taken during the latest week-long stoppage in mid-December after a revised offer from Stagecoach was rejected by a 95 percent majority. The offer was packaged as a 9 percent increase but was based on two instalments spread over a 15-month period. Bus workers saw through this fraud, having already suffered a pay freeze for 2020. They explained to the WSWs it would leave a massive shortfall in their living standards.

In a December 14 press release on the indefinite strike vote, Unite complained that Stagecoach refused to make a "reasonable" offer. General Secretary Sharon Graham referred to the huge profits enjoyed by the company. However, on opposition it only states, "The workers, who earn £10.52 an hour in Sheffield and £10.80 an hour in Barnsley and Rotherham, want their pay to increase to a minimum of £11.40 an hour."

Unite has not tabled a central pay demand since disputes developed across Stagecoach from autumn this year. The union bureaucracy has prevented numerous disputes from resulting in national action which would have brought the UK network to a standstill and enabled bus workers to win a sizeable pay increase across the board.

The vast majority of pay settlements agreed by Unite now trail behind the current rate of inflation, which has

climbed to 7.1 percent. This was made possible by Unite suspending strikes after overwhelming mandates for action, with Graham celebrating below inflation deals as victories. The agreements have also enshrined pay differentials between drivers. This enforced disunity and suppression of strike action defines the corporatist role of Unite and has proved decisive for Stagecoach.

By taking their stand, Stagecoach Yorkshire bus workers are coming into conflict with the relations established between the company with Unite nationally. Managing Director Phil Medlicott, in opposition to the strike action, even cited favourably the deals Stagecoach had agreed with the union across the network.

Unite accepts that Stagecoach can keep hold of its ill-gotten profits during the pandemic on the proviso that it pays bus workers the bare minimum in line with its competitors at a local level. That is why the union deems £11.40 an hour acceptable for drivers in South Yorkshire and £10.50 in South Wales.

Bus workers at Stagecoach Yorkshire must take a warning from the experiences of their co-workers at Stagecoach South Wales, whose strike action was ended only weeks before theirs began. This was the longest running strike at Stagecoach since the pay disputes started with 17 days of action taken from October. From the beginning Unite pegged back workers' demands to an increase from £9.50 to £10.50 per hour in line with local competitors not parity within Stagecoach. Workers at the three garages rejected a revised offer of £10.40 an hour, which included unpaid meal breaks and reduced sick pay.

Just prior to the commencement of indefinite strike action, Unite recommended a deal for £10.50 an hour which was accepted. Unite hailed an "historic victory"

while it buried the contents of the agreement. Even based on this miserly sum the goal posts had been shifted including productivity strings with the 10.5 percent increase spread over two years.

The divide and conquer strategy by Stagecoach and Unite has emboldened the company to put forward derisory pay offers such as 1.5 percent at Cambus, which operates as part of Stagecoach East.

Around 400 bus workers at garages in Cambridge, Fenstanton and Peterborough rejected the pay proposals of 1.5 percent from April 2021 and a further 1.5 percent from this month for the year 2021/2, and voted by 96 percent for 10 days of strikes from January 4.

This will start with five days continuous action followed by five one day stoppages on alternate days. Unite is meeting with the company this week to try and avert action by workers who have been denied a pay increase since April 2019.

Stagecoach has announced an increase in profits by 104.3 percent in the six months to October 2021, £32.9 million compared with the £16.1 million for the same period last year. This was achieved with passenger levels recovering to 70 percent of pre-pandemic levels as the company celebrated the removal of all public health restrictions back in July in anticipation of increasing its bottom line.

Sir Brian Souter and Dame Ann Gloag, the majority owners of Stagecoach and joint fourteenth richest individuals in Scotland, are to make a further killing through the sale of the company to National Express. The two are expected to retain £117 million in shares. The planned takeover was announced in mid-December and is aimed to be completed by late 2022. The *Financial Times* reports that Stagecoach will have a 25 percent stake in the combined company, which would become the UK's largest road transport provider with 40,000 vehicles and a workforce of around 70,000. "The deal combines the UK largest coach fleet and extensive international operations of National Express with the operator of more than 25 percent of the country's buses."

The takeover is in part to counteract the loss of income from falling passenger numbers, as the private operators are weaned off the huge government subsidies received over the course of the pandemic. In England this has exceeded £10 billion and has been tapered to £8 million per week, which is due to end this

year.

Unite is seeking worthless undertakings from the two private operators that the takeover will not take place at the expense of terms and conditions. The projected cost cutting expected to result from the establishment of the £1.9 billion transport giant has increased from £35 million to £45 million since September. The FT states this will be achieved through "sharing depots, optimising their routes and combining back offices." The takeover of Stagecoach by National Express will pave the way for a restructuring of terms and conditions to ensure a further concentration of wealth in the hands of the private monopolies which already dominate the bus network.

Bus workers should reject the presentation by Unite that the struggle at Stagecoach Yorkshire and Cambus are local disputes which can be resolved through the union bureaucracy getting back round the table with management. They must turn to the formation of rank-and-file committees to forge links across the sectional divide upheld by Unite. Trusted representatives of workers should be elected to fight for a cost of living plus pay increase with no backroom negotiations.

Bus workers are once again placed on the front line of a resurging pandemic, with the more transmissible and immune evasive variant Omicron, as the Johnson government blocks any emergency health measures to reduce its spread and has cut self-isolation times from 10 to seven days. In opposition to their workplaces being turned into hotbeds of the virus to prioritise profits over lives, bus workers must fight for basic health measures and oppose the cover-up of infections and deaths by Unite and other unions. This is the programme advanced by the London Bus Rank and File Committee, "Organise a fightback for higher wages. No to sweatshops exploitation!"



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