

UK: Unite celebrates sell-out agreement at Stagecoach Yorkshire

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Unite has ended the all-out strike by around 560 bus drivers and depot staff in South Yorkshire, England based on a deal packaged as an inflation-busting 10.7 percent pay rise.

The pay deal was accepted last Friday after workers were balloted at the garages in Barnsley, Rotherham and two garages in Sheffield. The terms for ending the dispute were agreed between Stagecoach and Unite following talks at the arbitration service ACAS from last Monday, in which the union agreed to separate deals for the bus workers in the same subsidiary.

The union first announced the suspension of strike action at Rotherham and Barnsley from Wednesday and the Sheffield garages from Thursday. This divisive act struck at the heart of the joint action taken by bus workers for parity pay, which included two week-long strikes in December before its escalation to all out action from New Year's Day.

A Unite press release on January 14 provides no details of the results of the ballots, in line with the veil drawn around ending the dispute including key details of the agreements that refute its false narrative of a "huge" pay deal. While the details of the revised offer were not made public, the WSWS warned this was a recipe for a sell-out and urged bus workers to reject the divide and rule framework being imposed by the union on behalf of Stagecoach.

The declaration, "Unite wins Again—South Yorkshire bus drivers WIN fair pay," is laced with deceit. The headline figure of 10.7 percent hides a below inflation agreement, as it is a two-year agreement until 2023. RPI inflation already stands at 7.1 percent but is expected to increase when updated on January 19. As one worker stated on the local Facebook group of Unite North East, Yorkshire and Humber, "whichever way you dress this up it's a 3 year deal". This was a

reference to the fact that Stagecoach Yorkshire bus workers like their colleagues across the UK suffered a pay freeze last year.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, "This is a huge win for our members at Stagecoach in South Yorkshire and shows what can be achieved when workers stand together in a union."

The fact is Unite has enforced a deal which has maintained the pay disparity between the garages. The 10.7 percent equates to a miserable hourly rate at the Barnsley and Rotherham garages of £11.91 an hour and even less, £11.61, at the Sheffield garages, the same margin of difference prior to the strike.

The company has relied on the services of Unite in maintaining low pay and a pay gap between the garages. The union falsely aligned itself with the demand for parity, while it prepared a betrayal at the first opportunity. On the Twitter account of Unite during the strike the union drew attention to the pay gap between the Rotherham/Barnsley garages and the Sheffield garages, stating, "Unite does not think that's fair. Do you?"

The sell-out at Stagecoach Yorkshire has been taken from the playbook of Unite across the company, overturning strike mandates from last autumn in favour of below inflation agreements. In one of only two other strikes to have gone ahead out of 20 pay disputes nationally, at Stagecoach South Wales, after 17 days of strike action Unite agreed a miserly £10.50 an hour agreement for the 200 workers at the three garages and hailed a "major victory". Its press release did not mention that even the 10.5 percent increase was for two years and included productivity strings.

The union most recently suspended 10 days of strike action by 400 bus workers from January 4 at Cambus Ltd in Cambridgeshire, part of Stagecoach East.

Cambus bus workers had voted for strike action on a mandate of 96 percent after rejecting a derisory pay offer of 1.5 percent. Unite suspended strike action at the Fenstanton and Cambridge garages and then the next day at Peterborough to enter separate negotiations on a revised offer. After declaring it to be the latest battle in the campaign for a pay increase on UK buses, there has been no further reporting on the deal or the vote on it.

The Unite bureaucracy can rely at all times on its faithful retainers in the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP). Their coverage of the struggle has been devoted to shoring up the credibility of Graham, who they backed in her election in August as the “Workers Candidate”. Their false claims of a militant revival of the trade unions heralded by Graham’s victory were directed against a rank-and-file rebellion from below.

The SWP and SP claimed the South Yorkshire strike was going from strength to strength, even as Unite was suspending the action as a result of its backroom negotiations with the company. In its article on January 11, the SWP ran with a headline, “Fightback at Stagecoach continues” on the same day that Unite had suspended all strike action. The SWP stated, “Plans are being made for solidarity rallies in Sheffield, Barnsley and Rotherham. The Stagecoach workers are pleased with the support they are getting from their union with good strike pay.”

On January 12, the SP was busy portraying the ACAS talks as a climbdown by the company: “having failed to break the strike they have now asked the arbitration service Acas in to conciliate.” As Unite was sending bus workers back on the job its headline read, “South Yorkshire bus strikes spreading and getting stronger.”

Both the SWP and SP have maintained a stony silence ever since the strike ended and the sell-out deal was implemented. Their token gestures of solidarity for the Stagecoach Yorkshire strike were only aimed at forestalling any challenge to the control of the dispute by the union bureaucracy, as it pursued its corporatist relations with Stagecoach through to the state arbitration services to throttle its members.

Whether it is the fight for a living wage, or workplace protection against the pandemic and the more transmissible variant of Omicron driving up infections, hospitalisation, and deaths these issues will

not be resolved outside of a struggle against the corporate oligarchy and its servants in the union bureaucracy. This means building a network of rank and file committees, as advanced in the call by the London Bus Rank and File Committee, “Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop exploitation!”



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