

UK: The sellout of the Stagecoach Yorkshire pay strike and the pseudo-left accomplices of Unite

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The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP), Britain's largest pseudo-left groups, have finally broken their silence on the sellout by Unite of the Stagecoach Yorkshire pay strike.

As a previous *World Socialist Web Site* article explained, the last time both tendencies covered the dispute it was to claim that the strike action was going from strength to strength. This was even as Unite had begun the suspension of the all-out strike action by 560 bus workers across South Yorkshire at the garages in Rotherham, Barnsley and Sheffield. The halt was the result of a deal agreed between the union and Stagecoach through talks at the arbitration service ACAS.

The SWP and SP always present the trade unions as democratically accountable to their members—organisations that have not undergone any fundamental transformation from defensive organisations of workers into extended arms of management. At no stage in the Stagecoach Yorkshire dispute did they say a word as the union bureaucracy engineered a return to work without a vote on the revised pay award.

The ballots were held as bus drivers were already back behind the wheel, with Stagecoach reporting a return to full services. The joint action was demobilised and divided, with bus workers at Rotherham and Barnsley going back first followed a day later by the Sheffield garages. This was to enforce the accepted framework of separate deals maintaining the pay disparity between garages the joint action had fought to overturn.

In the case of the SWP the deal is so rotten that they are forced into finally making token criticisms, after maintaining throughout that Unite was waging a determined fight. A *Socialist Worker* article by Sam Ord dated January 18 is headlined, "South Yorkshire Stagecoach bus strike over but it could have won more."

The author has form, whitewashing the sellout of the pay strike by 2,000 RATP bus drivers in London in 2021, answered by the WSWs. His article acknowledges that the South Yorkshire agreement is below inflation, without mentioning that Unite has packaged the deal as an inflation busting 10.7 percent increase. Aware of the WSWs analysis of the rotten deal, Ord notes, "in reality the increase is some 5 percent for each year of the deal. With inflation running at over 7 percent, that's effectively a pay cut."

While drawing attention to the fact that workers' living

standards are being slashed, Ord avoids defining the deal as a sellout. It merely falls short of what could have been achieved.

By this interpretation the question still arises, why did the SWP not make a call for bus workers to reject an agreement rigged in favour of Stagecoach? Because to do so would have meant challenging the control of the dispute by Unite. Even when the most immediate interests of workers are threatened, the SWP is dedicated to ensuring that the domination of a bureaucracy in which many of its members have a comfortable niche is not threatened.

In its previous article the *Socialist Worker* 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."

Following the sellout, it now confesses, "Unite officials undermined the action. Firstly Unite dropped the demand for an equal rate of pay across depots in Sheffield, Barnsley and Rotherham. This ended in the union suspending action by workers in Rotherham and Barnsley to consider an offer, leaving those in Sheffield to fight alone."

Those union officials responsible for conspiring against the strike are of course not identified, especially the chief culprit, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham—who both the SWP and SP backed as the supposedly "left" candidate in the elections last August and have boosted ever since. "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," said Graham.

The *Socialist Worker* goes so far as to make a backhanded dig at other Stagecoach workers to justify Unite's previous sellouts. Comparing the pay award in south Yorkshire to those across the Stagecoach network it comments, "This is more than many are achieving, because they fought hard." Every striking Stagecoach worker nationally has "fought hard", only to end up with a rotten pay award because they were betrayed by Unite.

The SWP justified the suspension by Unite of the pay strike by 400 bus workers in Cambridgeshire at Cambus a subsidiary of Stagecoach East, just days before the all-out strike in South Yorkshire by reporting this was based on an "improved offer."

It now admits, "Also Unite suspended a strike of 400 workers on Cambus, in Cambridge, a subsidiary of Stagecoach. The strikes should have joined to hit the bosses harder."

The SWP cannot say what is clear for all to see, that a successful fight against Stagecoach can only proceed through a rank-and-file rebellion against Unite. Instead, until now, the *Socialist Worker* was busy promoting the falsely packaged pay “victories” claimed by Graham. On November 29, as Stagecoach Yorkshire bus workers took their first week of strike action, the *Socialist Worker* wrote, “The union has won 6.5, 7.5, and 10.5 percent deals in other Stagecoach disputes.”

To take the example of the highest 10.5 percent agreement referred to, this was struck in South Wales after 17 days of strike action by 200 bus workers at three garages. This ended with a miserly uplift from £9.50 to £10.50 an hour and another two-year agreement similar to but on even lower pay than that at South Yorkshire.

Those reading the *Socialist Worker* would not even be aware that Unite entered closed-door talks with Stagecoach through the arbitration service ACAS to hatch the rotten South Yorkshire deal. To report this would cut across the SWP’s constant refrain that the union bureaucracy can be pressured to the left by militant pressure from below. The escalation of the strike by Stagecoach Yorkshire drivers did not push the union into a fight, but into an alliance with the company to suppress the struggle via an arm of the state set up for that purpose.

The dissembling of the SWP is only exceeded by the Socialist Party, whose article in the January 19 edition of *The Socialist* by Alastair Tice is titled, “South Yorkshire strike results in ‘huge pay win’”. It faithfully parrots the boasts of Unite and Graham, even while admitting the pay award is for two years, making a nonsense of their claim since RPI inflation (which Unite officially uses as its pay criteria) has reached 7.5 percent.

Openly endorsing the divisive awarding of different pay rates for each garage, the SP waxes lyrical on how, “In a two-year deal, workers at the Barnsley and Rotherham depots will go from £10.80 an hour to £11.91 in March, and at the two Sheffield depots from £10.50 to £11.60 an hour in May, and retain their Sunday and evening premium rates.”

Celebrating this divide-and-conquer strategy serves to expose all the SP’s empty declarations of “solidarity”. During the strike, the SP and SWP hailed every token message of support from other unions and the Community section of Unite—a smokescreen to conceal Unite’s isolation of the dispute from others throughout Stagecoach and at other bus companies as it prepared to betray the fight.

The only solidarity both tendencies are committed to is with the union bureaucracy against the working class.

The SWP and SP are effectively competing with one another for who can act as the most reliable adjunct of the Unite bureaucracy. Graham has become a regular feature at SP national meetings, where she is afforded celebrity status. She was among several trade union bureaucrats wheeled out at the Socialism 2021 rally last November, beamed in via video on a massive screen and provided top billing even above the SP’s own leaders.

The report of the meeting in the November 24 edition of *The Socialist* states, “Like the Socialist Party, Sharon argues for the trade unions to play a central role in working-class struggle—coordinating across unions and internationally as well as

organising in communities to take on the landlords and the councils.”

This is how the SP describes a career union bureaucrat who, since she was elected Unite general secretary, has been directly responsible for a firefighting exercise to extinguish strikes across public transport, road haulage, manufacturing and warehouse and distribution centres by thousands of low-paid workers on the basis of below inflation agreements.

The SP spoke most approvingly of the fact that Graham was “building a disputes unit that will triple in size over the next months.” This has been the very mechanism through which strike action has been suppressed.

Unite, along with all other unions, has completely adapted to the resumption of the herd immunity policy of the Johnson government as all public health measures are recklessly scrapped in the face of the Omicron variant, with an average of nearly 300 deaths and more than 90,000 infections recorded each day over the previous week.

The energies expended by the SWP and SP in any industrial struggle are dedicated to ensuring that an emerging movement of the working class does not slip the reins of the union bureaucracy as it deepens its collaboration with the employers and government.

There is nothing militant, let alone socialist about these tendencies. They are the most conservative political force imaginable, dedicated to preventing the very break with the trade union apparatus on which any successful fightback depends.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) are alone in providing a voice and a political perspective to the many workers coming into struggle against the employers and the trade unions that act as their industrial police force. The SEP fights for the building of a network of rank-and-file committees through which to wage this battle.

As explained in the call issued by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, “Organise the fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop conditions!”: “A network of rank-and-file organisations, cutting across divisions between companies and industries, and crossing national borders, will link-up the disparate struggles of bus and transport workers, break the isolation being imposed by Unite, the RMT and other unions, and unite workers into a powerful force.”



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