

UK: Stagecoach West bus drivers to stage month-long strike over pay

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Around 380 bus drivers at Stagecoach West are due to take part in a month-long strike from March 10 to April 9 in their fight for a pay increase.

The bus drivers, members of the Unite union, voted overwhelmingly for strike action at the six garages—Bristol, Cheltenham, Coalway, Gloucester, Stroud, and Swindon—in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire in the south-west of England.

The bus drivers all receive a low pay rate but even within this there are disparities with Swindon bus drivers receiving barely £12 per hour while many of their colleagues at the other garages are paid under £11 according to the union.

The union has not publicly reported the pay offer at the other garages outside of Swindon but at that garage the 80 drivers in Unite were offered an insulting one-off cash payment of £400.

With Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation at 7.8 percent, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis is fuelling a new wave of militancy. This is expressed by the fact that strike action by bus drivers at Stagecoach West would be a first.

In contrast, Unite has forestalled strike action, having balloted the Swindon garage separately, with the result a 98 percent vote in favour announced on February 22. This was on the pretext of allowing the company to make its final offer. At the other four garages it delayed announcing strike dates for two weeks after the overwhelming vote in favour on February 10. Unite stated in a press release this was “opportunity to reflect” on the strike vote, adding, “The company failed to grasp this opportunity to avoid strike action.”

While Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham makes hollow declarations against pay restraint what defines Unite is its commitment to suppress industrial action. For all the bluster about fair pay, Unite does not even formulate a pay demand.

This is the case even under conditions in which workers

are confronted with the highest inflation rates in 30 years. Unite has described Stagecoach as “Filthy Rich” pointing to the profits of the parent company in 2020 “of £58.4 million and it has £875 million of available liquidity.”

Since the autumn of last year Stagecoach has been the focus of a spate of pay disputes around the UK which built up against the background of a pay freeze throughout the pandemic. Bus workers have continued to make profits for the private operators while their health and lives have been endangered through unsafe working conditions, and they suffered decline in their real wages. This could not have been enforced without the Unite union.

Stagecoach—the largest private bus and coach operator in the country—has been reliant on Unite to prevent national strike action, agreeing pay agreements below the rate of inflation and repudiating bus drivers’ demands for parity pay, even within the same operations.

Unite has constructed a false narrative presenting revised offers to bus drivers around the country since last year as pay victories, after it averted strike action in the main which it had been mandated to organise. The union ensured that the two main strikes to have broken out from around 20 disputes—at Stagecoach South Wales and South Yorkshire—remained isolated rather than part of a broader counter offensive.

The union has now gone from falsification to outright lies in an article on Unite Live on February 17 claiming that “Unite drives though (sic) divide and rule to win at national level.”

The article begins by recounting the pro-forma claim by Unite to have turned a pay freeze into pay deals worth up to 10.5 percent for more than 2,000 workers, also referencing other above average pay deals including 5.5 percent and 7.5 percent.

The WSWS has already exposed this cherry-picking approach which is aimed at concealing the rotten content

of these supposedly breakthrough agreements. The 10.5 percent is particularly obscene as it is the deal at Stagecoach South Wales which involved an increase in the hourly rate to £10.50—a little more than £1 above the minimum wage. Unite hid the fact that this was spread over two years and involved productivity strings.

Taking as its point of departure the acceptance of anti-strike legislation, Unite claimed that Bobby Morton, its national officer for passenger transport, and Stagecoach shop stewards had prepared for “a perfectly legal national strike in all but name.” The different operations of the bus company were balloted separately by Unite but votes for strike action were all to be announced at the same time last November.

Morton states, “First it was 1 per cent, then 1.5 per cent plus a one-off bonus of £400 or £450. We repeatedly knocked these back until we got to a stage where everyone had received a final offer from the company. Then everyone balloted for industrial action and waited”.

The claim that action was co-ordinated through the shop stewards and that the “company’s divide and rule policy” has been left “crumpled in the dust” is absurd.

Unite, having suppressed action through the first half of 2021, set about ensuring the strike mandates was used as “leverage” . The strike votes were used as a bargaining chip with the company to ensure it worked through the union bureaucracy *to demobilise bus workers and prevent anational stoppage*. This in fact had already started in October with Unite suspending strike action in Scotland and England for pay agreements as low as 2.25 percent in Liverpool and 3.7 percent in Manchester. In the second week of November, Unite suspended strike action by hundreds of bus drivers in the north and south of England which paved the way for further miserable deals. At the centre of these was its renegeing on the demand by bus drivers for parity pay between the garages with the same Stagecoach regional operations.

Unite wants bus workers to accept these pay awards as the best outcome possible, and, in the most cynical fashion, proof of its commitment to “collectivism”. Unite’s role cannot be judged on the basis of microscopic improvements to insulting pay offers originally tabled by Stagecoach. Unite’s essential function lies in suppressing a powerful incipient strike movement that would have shut down Stagecoach operations and broken the back of its pay restraint policy.

The union’s role as an industrial police force is presented as part of Graham’s strategy for the “reconfiguration of the union to increase industrial power

and propel positive change at the workplace.”

As this entire experience demonstrates, Stagecoach West bus drivers are not just facing a fight against Stagecoach but its junior partner Unite. They should form a rank-and-file committee, independent of Unite and the transport unions, to organise their action and reach out to other Stagecoach bus drivers around the country who are confronting the consequences of a wave of sell-out deals.

Such a rebellion cannot stop short of Stagecoach. Unite has sabotaged strikes by other bus workers over pay and exploitative conditions at Arriva Wales and most recently at First Manchester. The union has also refused to set a date for strike action at London United after bus workers rejected a final offer of 2.25 percent and voted overwhelmingly for strike action a month ago.

The fight for a genuine pay rise must be combined with the struggle against other benchmarks in exploitation demanded by the private operators, including consecutive days worked without a rest and the criminally negligent removal of all COVID restrictions including the ending of isolation rules and mask wearing.

Bus workers constitute a powerful section of the working class but to wield their collective strength requires a clear break from organisations that are unions in name only, committed to snuffing out all forms of resistance and beholden to the corporations and what they deem “affordable” to maintain their profit margins.



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