

Arriva London South bus drivers vote to strike, rejecting derisory 1.5 percent pay offer

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11 March 2022

Bus drivers at Arriva London South have voted emphatically to strike against a derisory pay offer of just 1.5 percent from one of the “Big Five” bus operators in the country, Arriva UK Bus.

Around 1,000 bus drivers at four garages in south London—Brixton, Norwood, Thornton Heath and Croydon—who are members of Unite, returned a mandate for strike action by a majority of over 95 percent.

The strike action will commence with a one-day stoppage on March 21, followed by a two-day stoppage from March 28, impacting bus routes across central and south London.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has described Arriva’s pay offer as “pathetic,” while regional officer John Murphy described it as “insulting.” But Unite has again refused table a pay demand of its own. In May last year, a Unite briefing paper calculated wages for bus drivers should increase by 9.8 percent to cover real cost-of-living increases. But the union has continued to enforce below-inflation pay deals while inflation has since risen to a 30-year high of 7.8 percent (RPI).

Unite is not preparing for a fight but offering its services to Arriva to prevent one. Murphy’s comments in a March 8 press release announcing the strike, amounted to a begging letter to the company: “Even at this late stage, delays and disruption across London can be avoided if Arriva is prepared to make a realistic pay offer and returns to the negotiating table.”

Unite is already downscaling strike action so the company does not confront unified action. The same press release contains a footnote that bus drivers at two garages who were part of the dispute will not participate in the strike: “The proposed disputes involving Arriva workers at the Dartford and Grays depots have been resolved after the drivers accepted improved pay offers.”

No details are provided of these “improved offers” whose only purpose is to facilitate a divide and rule

policy.

Arriva can plead poverty only because it knows that in Unite it has a reliable industrial police force which will not challenge its profitability. That Unite has cited its 3 percent pay deal at Arriva North West as its benchmark shows it is preparing a sell-out.

Last November, the union twice suspended strike action by 1,800 bus drivers over revised offers at Arriva North West to enforce the 3 percent pay deal. Unite issued a joint statement with the management and GMB union recommending the de facto pay cut. The sabotage of their fight produced a wave of 100 angry comments from bus drivers on Unite’s Facebook pages.

Later that month, Unite suspended all-out strike action by 400 bus drivers at Arriva Wales on its fifth day to promote a revised offer which it described as “new and improved.” The 3.05 percent deal constituted a half percent difference on its previous offer and ensured that pay disparity between lower paid drivers in Wales compared to those in north-west England remained, despite Unite claiming it was fighting for parity.

Unite is actively suppressing London-wide strike action over pay. In early February, a ballot of around 1,000 drivers at London United returned a strike mandate of over 90 percent after they rejected a miserly pay offer of 2.5 percent for 2021/22 and an uplift tied to a lower rate of inflation for the following year.

Despite their ultimatum, the company came back with a 3.1 percent offer which has also been rejected. As is the case with all the other bus operators, London United is reliant on the union to block strike action at seven garages across west and south-west London. Unite is expert at grinding down opposition through balloting over revised proposals which are presented as favourable only by comparison to the original insulting offer.

As far as the sanctity of voting is concerned, Unite operates its own selective criteria in which strike

mandates can be ignored or overturned. It ballots its members until it gets the result it intends, preventing any further disruption to its cosy relations with bus company executives.

This has been exposed at Stagecoach, the largest bus and coach operator in the country, where the union has worked this past year to prevent a backlog of disputes from becoming national strike action.

Graham's narrative, that her election as General Secretary last August has been followed by an unending series of pay victories, relies on a falsification of below-inflation pay agreements. Unite national officer Bobby Morton made the fraudulent claim that shop stewards at Stagecoach co-ordinated action leaving the divide and rule policy of the bus companies "crumpled in dust." The record shows that strike mandates were used as a bargaining chip to ensure the company worked with the union bureaucracy to demobilise bus workers and prevent a national stoppage.

Unite only recently prevented the first ever strike action by bus drivers at Stagecoach West. The 380 drivers at six garages in south-west England were due to strike for a month from March 10 to April 9. Their acceptance of a revised deal announced on March 8 has not been accompanied by the usual fanfare of "another pay victory" claimed by Graham and Unite. The 12 percent increase is a two-year deal up to October 2023.

In addition to concealing yet another below inflation pay agreement, Unite's press release showed where its priorities lay. It was headlined, "Cheltenham racegoers buses back on as Stagecoach workers secure pay increase," celebrating that there would be no disruption to the annual horse-racing event, the Cheltenham Festival, that starts next Tuesday.

While the pandemic is declared over, allowing the criminal scrapping of all emergency health measures, the private operators continue to receive COVID related subsidies. On March 1, the Johnson government announced an additional £150 million for the next six months for the bus and light rail industry in England. This adds to the £2 billion already gifted to 160 operators over the last two years since the start of the pandemic.

The parent company of Arriva UK Bus is Deutsche Bahn. The company boasted last year that a drop in passenger usage at its UK bus operations had already been offset by government support. Three of its board directors voted themselves a 10 percent pay rise for 2023, including CEO Richard Lutz, whose salary is set to increase from €900,000 to €1 million.

The fight for pay cannot be entrusted to Unite which has demonstrated there is no line it will not cross to protect mileage and profits at workers' expense. The tripartite agreements it signed at the start of the pandemic with the bus companies and Transport for London created a hostile environment for workplace safety. This has led to the deaths of 78 bus workers, among the highest proportion in any occupation from COVID-19. An organisation which sacrifices workers' lives for corporate interests will not defend their living standards.

Bus drivers at Arriva and London United must form a rank-and-file committee to co-ordinate a genuine fightback linking up with Stagecoach and First Bus drivers whose struggles have faced sabotage at the hands of Unite.

Bus workers constitute a key 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 suffocating all forms of resistance and beholden to the corporations and their profit margins.

The fight for a genuine pay rise must be combined with opposition to the raft of sweatshop conditions demanded by the employers including the lengthening of consecutive days worked without a rest, reduced break times and the removal of all COVID restrictions such as the ending of mask wearing and isolation rules.

This is the perspective outlined in the London Bus Rank and File Committee in its statement "Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop conditions!" We urge bus workers to make contact and discuss how this fight can be taken forward.



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