UK: Arriva Yorkshire bus workers ballot for strike action against pay offer less than half the rate of inflation

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Around 650 bus workers at Arriva Yorkshire in the UK are currently balloting over strike action after the bus company tabled a pay offer of just 4.1 percent for this year.

The ballot, which closes on May 23, covers bus drivers and engineers who are members of Unite at five depots in north and west Yorkshire at Selby, Heckmondwike, Wakefield, Castleford and Dewsbury.

According to drivers the pay offer amounts to a 35-pence-an-hour increase, which works out at less than 4.1 percent for those on higher rates of pay.

Unite's press release dated May 4 quoted Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham declaring, "This offer is a pay cut and is unacceptable to Unite. Arriva has to think again and come back with an offer that fully reflects the cost of living." Her claim that Unite is standing up against pay restraint is a fraud.

The union's pay claim of 6.6 percent at Arriva Yorkshire is below inflation, which is why it is not even referred to in the press release. The current RPI inflation rate is 9 percent, while even the lower CPI inflation rate is due to reach 10 percent later this year.

Graham's cynical claims that Unite is fighting pay restraint are being further exposed at Arriva London South (ALS), where drivers have already voted down two below inflation pay deals for 2021-22. ALS drivers went on strike last Wednesday at Brixton, Norwood, Thornton Heath and South Croydon, rejecting a 3 percent offer plus a pathetic £300 lump sum. But Unite entered talks with management the next day, announcing the suspension of this week's strike to put a third offer to members that amounts to yet another pay cut.

The latest proposal is for 3.5 percent, with the additional 0.5 percent applying to this year's pay period. The lump sum has been reduced from £300 to £250 and the award is not backdated to the April 2021 pay anniversary. Bobby Morton, Unite lead for passenger transport, claimed this constitutes an "improved offer." Bus drivers at ALS have been scathingover Unite's conduct in the dispute, with many drivers telling WSWS they intend to reject the rotten deal in a ballot this week.

Arriva drivers are not just in a fight against the company but against Unite. The union operates top-down as an arm of the private operators in preventing the fight for a genuine pay increase.

At Arriva Yorkshire, the starting hourly rate for bus drivers in the first year is £9.79 (just 29 pence more than the minimum wage). Drivers then graduate to £10.91 for two years, before reaching the top rate of £12.15.

The pandemic has been seized on by the bus companies to justify a frontal assault on wages and conditions, while even the pretence of COVID safety is out the window.

Bus drivers at Arriva told WSWS they have been instructed to report for work even if they are ill with COVID-19. This is a direct result of the Johnson government's reckless "herd immunity" policies, with all social distancing measures ended in February despite infections still claiming thousands of lives each week.

An Arriva Yorkshire driver told WSWS, "How responsible is this especially when we are picking up elderly people?" Mandatory mask wearing on public transport ended months ago, turning daily peak hour commutes into super spreader events.

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Disregard for workplace health and safety is combining with low pay and burnout from long hours to exacerbate driver shortages. At the Heckmondwike garage more than 50 drivers have reportedly left over the past six months.

The deregulation of bus services outside London means private operators have free license to determine timetables and routes. Arriva Yorkshire has reduced the frequency of its services on Saturday to a Sunday timetable, adding to overcrowding and placing stress on drivers from frustrated passengers who have been left stranded.

Across England, bus and light rail operators received £2 billion in subsidies from the Johnson government during two years of the pandemic. Arriva's parent company, DB Group, reported that revenue losses from reduced passenger numbers had been fully covered in 2021 due to taxpayer funded government handouts.

But bus drivers' pay received no such protection. It has continued a downward spiral with Arriva Yorkshire providing an increase of just 15 pence an hour and a £200 lump sum last year.

Sharon Graham claims to have led a string of pay victories since becoming general secretary. But Unite's publicity conceals a different story. Many of its headline pay deals—including Stagecoach South Yorkshire, Stagecoach South Wales and Stagecoach Bluebird—apply for more than one year. At Arriva, it is trying to force through pay agreements substantially below inflation. Unite has worked to block wider strike action that would provide the basis for a genuine pay increase across the board.

At no stage has Unite challenged the bus companies over their brutal sacrifice of workers' safety and lives to profits during the pandemic. Instead, Unite campaigned against mandatory vaccinations, a necessary public health measure to protect lives.

The pay deals pushed through by Unite have been welcomed by the private operators for maintaining pay disparities between subsidiaries and even between garages. In disputes at Stagecoach and Arriva since last year, drivers demanded an end to these differentials. But Unite reneged, pushing through below-inflation offers following their cancellation of strikes or ending those which broke out in isolation.

The basic demand for equal pay reflects the common unity of bus drivers from a class standpoint and their experience as key workers who have kept society moving. The bus companies have been able to maintain different pay rates to maximise their profits as part of a constant race to the bottom.

The central issue facing bus workers is overcoming the pro-company divisions enforced by Unite via the separation of their struggles along company and subsidiary lines.

The pay fight at Arriva Yorkshire and Arriva London South should be part of one struggle. The major operators plead poverty, while Unite prevents any challenge to the profits they have amassed through their collective exploitation of transport workers. A network of rank-and-file committees is needed to unlock the social power of the working class and end the artificial division of workers along sectional and national lines in the fight against transnational bus companies that exploit the labour of workers all over the world.

As the London Bus Rank and File Committee has stated, "Privatisation and the subordination of transport to corporate profit has been a disaster. If transport giants such as Arriva say they cannot provide decent pay and conditions or affordable fares for passengers, they should be taken into public ownership and placed under the democratic control of the working class. The billions of pounds squandered in shareholder dividends and profits must be freed for socially useful purposes."

We encourage Arriva Yorkshire drivers to make contact and discuss how to take this fight forward.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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