

UK: Arriva Yorkshire bus workers vote to strike against insulting 4.1 percent pay offer

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Bus workers at Arriva Yorkshire in England have rejected a 4.1 percent pay offer and voted to strike, with all out action set to start from June 6.

The ballot covered around 650 bus drivers and engineers who are members of Unite at the five depots in north and west Yorkshire—Selby, Heckmondwike, Wakefield, Castleford and Dewsbury.

The offer by the company is a de facto pay cut, with inflation already at a 40 year high of 9 percent CPI and 11.1 percent RPI.

Drivers' determination to fight is evident in the 96 percent majority vote for strike action. The starting rate for a first-year driver at Arriva Yorkshire is £9.79 an hour—just 29 pence more than the minimum wage—with the top hourly rate £12.15 after three years

Arriva Yorkshire bus workers are well placed to wage a fight for a cost of living pay increase as driver shortages are reported across the group. The company has been allowed to drastically cut the frequency of its buses, providing an inferior service to the public by resorting to a Sunday service on Saturday.

The Johnson government's scrapping of all COVID-19 public health measures and the negligence of the bus companies has transformed the bus network into a major vector for spreading the virus. Drivers have told the WSWs that staff have been instructed to work even if they are ill with COVID. The extremely low wages also compel drivers to work longer hours, leading to overwork and exhaustion.

After having been handed an emphatic mandate, the first response of Unite was to scramble to have strike action averted.

Unite regional officer Phil Bown stated, "Even at this late stage, strike action and the disruption it will cause can still be avoided if Arriva makes a realistic pay offer and returns to the negotiating table."

Arriva Yorkshire said in a statement "We remain keen to reach an agreement with Unite and continue to work towards this, with further talks agreed, ahead of June 6."

Unite's own pay demand of 6.6 percent falls well short of what is required at barely more than half the rate of RPI inflation (the criterion for wage rises to which Unite claims it formally adheres). Moreover, Unite regards the 6.6 percent demand as only a starting position for negotiations. As Bown's evasive comments about a "realistic offer" indicate, the union will not make a stand even on this figure.

No confidence can be placed in Unite to take this struggle forward. The union's rhetoric about a "pitiful offer" is only a way to maintain control of a dispute which they will seek to sell-out at the first available opportunity. This has been the experience of Arriva bus workers across the country.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, "Arriva is part of a multi-billion company. It has no business demanding that workers get by on pitiful low pay so that its boardroom can get ever richer. Arriva can easily afford to pay decently—it should do just that, or face industrial action."

Indeed! However, only a week ago Unite ended the dispute at Arriva London South (ALS) after three days of selective strike action by 1,000 drivers since March on a pay settlement of 3.5 percent and a £250 lump sum. This was half the rate of inflation for the 2021/2 pay award. Graham claimed, "Our members' strike action has secured an improved deal and brought this dispute to a conclusion."

The deal was accepted by a 56 percent majority only after Unite came back a third time with a revised substandard offer, after 1.5 percent and 3 percent had already been rejected. Unite took advantage of driver's

frustration over what was effectively last year's pay award dragging on and their desire to get on with the fight for an inflation proofed pay deal for 2022/3. Even under these conditions nearly half of bus drivers saw through the claims by Unite that the revised offer was an improvement, as claimed by both Graham and Unite lead officer for passenger transport, Bobby Morton. The deal deprived bus drivers of four months back-pay and the further 0.5 percent added to the rejected offer was included from this year's yet to be negotiated deal. Even the lump sum was reduced by £50.

This year's round of pay struggles will bring ALS drivers into greater conflict with Unite, which is defending the bus operators "narrow profit margins" not the shrinking pay packets of those which produce them.

Unite has played the same role in sabotaging a pay fight across Arriva UK Bus since the end of last year, enforcing three percent deals first at Arriva North West and Arriva Wales after cancelling strike action at the former and ending all out action on the fifth day at the latter.

The is an extension of the divide and rule policy it has followed at Stagecoach since last year, when it prevented 20 pay disputes which had built up across its UK network from becoming national strike action. Strike mandates were overturned to push below inflation pay agreements. At one of the only two major strikes that went ahead, at Stagecoach South Yorkshire, the union celebrated a "pay victory" of 10.7 percent in January—concealing the fact it was a two-year deal!

Around 560 drivers at the three bus depots had taken two weeks of strike action at the end of 2021 and more than a week of all-out strike action from New Year's Day. The agreement maintained pay disparity between the garages which drivers had sought to overturn with a clear call for parity. It led to a miserly increase 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 private operators can plead poverty because they know they have a reliable industrial police force in Unite that is dedicated to using its apparatus to suppressing bus workers' demands and preventing their unification in a common struggle.

The revenues of Arriva UK Bus parent company—DB Group—rose 18.4 percent in 2021 to €47.3 billion, with

a net profit of €5 billion. Stagecoach's profits increased by 104.3 percent to £32.9 million in the six months to October 2021 compared to the same period last year. The private operators have received billions of pounds in COVID subsidies from the government even as their criminal negligence has claimed bus drivers lives across the country and led to the death of 73 bus workers in London alone.

To counter the disinformation from Unite and its divisive policy, bus workers must form rank-and-file committees to break down the sectional and national barriers to establish their unity in a common fight against operators that are transnational corporations.

Bus workers must draw up pay demands not according to what the private operators claim is affordable, but what is required to protect their wages and living standards. This must be combined with a fight for health measures against the pandemic and opposition to the unending demands for reductions in break times, sick pay and lengthening of working hours.

We urge Arriva Yorkshire bus workers to make contact with the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee which is fighting to develop a network of such genuine organisations of struggle and has advanced a strategy to take forward the fight.



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