

Arriva Yorkshire bus strike enters second week as bus workers defy de facto pay cut

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An indefinite strike over pay at Arriva Yorkshire by around 650 bus workers has entered its second week. The first talks between Unite and the company since the start of the all-out strike are expected to take place on June 15.

The action by drivers and engineers at five bus garages across Arriva Yorkshire has brought its services to a standstill across most of the county.

Picket lines at the depots in Selby, Heckmondwike, Wakefield, Castleford and Dewsbury have seen hundreds turn out, showing bus workers' determination to achieve a genuine cost of living pay increase. It is now the longest all-out strike at Arriva UK Bus since a series of pay struggles broke out at the end of last year.

Arriva Yorkshire has responded with a media campaign aimed at turning the public against the strike, claiming that a "substantially improved pay offer" it tabled has not been put to a ballot by Unite. The company has branded the strike "unjustified" while forbidding employees from exercising their freedom of speech.

On June 1, just prior to the strike, Head of Operations Susan Carson issued an Employee Notice stating that "colleagues" must refrain from speaking to journalists or posting content online about the dispute. Only "authorised managers" could speak to the media.

She enforced this with the following threat, "To help clarify further, if any colleague talks to the press without permission or whose actions online breach the social media policy, they may face disciplinary action."

Unite has not challenged this gagging order, which prevents strikers from speaking about their pay and conditions or from making a broader appeal for support from other workers facing the same cost of living crisis.

Arriva Yorkshire bus workers rejected a previous offer of 4.1 percent and voted to strike by a 96 percent

majority. The latest revised offer was not put to a ballot because drivers, having seen its details, strongly opposed forfeiting their strike action to vote on a substandard deal which did not meet their basic demands.

Arriva Yorkshire's claim that its revised offer constitutes a pay rises of between 7 and 12.5 percent is the stuff of smoke and mirrors.

Firstly, the company has only backdated the pay offer to January this year, while negotiations have proceeded for more than eight months. Drivers are demanding an end to low pay for new starters who currently receive £9.79 an hour for the first year just 29 pence more than the minimum wage. Workers want new drivers to start on the middle pay band, and after 6 months progress to the top pay band as a major step towards pay parity.

Arriva Yorkshire wants to retain the year long period for new starters and proposes to increase the pay rate by just over 7 percent. This would be paid in two installments of around 4.2 percent from January to May and 2.9 percent from June onwards. The total increase would bring pay up to a miserly £10.50 an hour. The same incremental approach is applied to all pay grades including the top band for those with 3 years' service or more, whose hourly rate would increase from £12.15 to £13.00. The company's "generous offer" would leave drivers with a pay award less than two-thirds the current RPI inflation rate of 11.1 percent—a de facto pay cut.

The company's 12.7 percent headline figure only applies to drivers at Selby garage who are paid inferior rates even though they are part of the same bargaining unit and do the same job as every other Arriva Yorkshire driver. A driver currently on £10.20 an hour after 17+months would move to £11.50 at 24+months. The top rate for a driver at Selby is capped at this rate

and is £1.50 less than the proposals for all other garages.

Until now, Arriva and other bus companies have been able to rely on Unite to bring back revised offers to suspend strike action and wear down resistance. But the rampant cost of living crisis is undermining Unite's ability to perform this task without causing an immediate collapse of its waning credibility.

Unite originally pegged Arriva Yorkshire bus workers back to a 6.6 percent claim, despite this being well below inflation. This low benchmark figure is the only reason Arriva can claim its revised offer meets bus workers' demands.

The union's claim that it is pushing for a cost of living pay increase is framed in typically evasive language. Unite regional officer Phil Bown has referred to an "inflation-related pay increase of around 10%" in comments to the press. While Bown has provided comments to the corporate media he has not responded to requests from WSWS to confirm the content of Unite's pay claim.

A pay demand is not a throwaway line but a rallying point for workers to defend their living standards against the companies' single-minded pursuit of corporate profits.

This means a strategy to break down the sectional divisions erected by the companies and to unify the struggles of bus workers. This is the opposite of what Unite practices at Arriva and every other private operator.

Unite's duplicity is summed up by General Secretary Sharon Graham who grandstands about "profiteering restraint" not wage restraint, but last month endorsed a sell-out agreement at Arriva London South. After 1,000 drivers took strike action there for three days, Unite recommended ending the dispute with a pay award for last year of half the rate of inflation. The settlement was voted down by nearly half the membership, defying claims by Graham, her lead officer for passenger transport Bobby Morton and local reps that it represented an "improved offer."

The vote to accept was 56 percent, with Unite capitalising on drivers' frustration over the delay of last year's pay award. Union reps cynically argued that a below inflation award for last year would clear the decks for a proper cost-of-living rise for this year, but they have since fallen silent.

The real measure of Unite's commitment to a cost-of-living increase is not its belated lip service to RPI+ agreements in pay awards for 20,000 bus drivers across London, but its actions in suppressing any industrial action.

At London United, around 1,000 drivers have voted down three derisory pay offers brought back by Unite since the start of the year, including the last proposal of just 3.2 percent. The union was prepared to re-ballot over a 0.1 percent increase but has ignored a strike mandate, committing instead to arbitration talks not scheduled to start at ACAS until June 30.

Arriva Yorkshire bus workers should base their assessment of Unite on its divisive role in preventing a unified movement across Arriva's nationwide operations. Unite is also sitting on a strike mandate at Arriva Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire. It does not function as a defensive organisation for workers but to protect the profits of the private operators, suppressing collective action.

Unite's attempts to censor discussion is aimed at isolating the struggle at Arriva Yorkshire and should be opposed. No confidence can be placed in its negotiations with management and workers have a right to demand a straight answer over what exactly Unite's pay claim is. Full pay parity should be established between Selby and the other garages over terms and pay. An injury to one is an injury to all.

Rank-and-file committees should be established to draw up pay demands and to address poor conditions facing workers, exposing Arriva's bogus claims that such improvements are "unaffordable". The London Bus Rank and File Committee is seeking to co-ordinate a fightback across the country and internationally. We encourage Arriva Yorkshire bus drivers and engineers to make contact to discuss how this strategy can be developed.



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