

UK: Talks resume between Unite and Arriva Yorkshire as strike enters third week

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All-out strike action continues into its third week by around 650 Arriva Yorkshire bus workers at all its five garages. They have rejected a de facto wage cut in their pay award for this year. Talks resumed Monday after the first negotiations since the industrial action started on June 6 broke down last Wednesday after just four hours.

The source of the stand-off is the refusal by bus workers to accept a deal that does not meet the cost-of-living crisis. In the pay disputes up until now the company has been able to rely on Unite to grind down opposition by re-balloting over revised offers to the original derisory proposals tabled. This has been to smooth the path for final agreements falling below the rate of inflation. With the highest inflation rate in 40 years now running at 11 percent, this has reduced the room for manoeuvre between Unite and the private operators.

Arriva Yorkshire workers voted by 96 percent for the all-out action after rejecting 4.1 percent. A revised pay offer was not put to a vote because bus workers opposed any suspension of their strike for an offer the company described as “generous” but which amounted to around a 7 percent increase for the majority of drivers—an effective a pay cut.

From public reports of the talks last Wednesday the company reiterated its demand that Unite ballot over the revised offer and suspend the strike.

After a fortnight of continuous strike action, Unite has yet to issue any public update to its membership of more than a million—including its transport section of over 95,000 workers—explaining the issues at Arriva Yorkshire and making an appeal for solidarity.

The strike was only mentioned as a footnote in a press release June 16 over the balloting of 1,800 bus workers at Arriva North West in opposition to an

insulting maximum pay offer of just 3 percent, or 6 percent with strings. These include reductions in sick pay and loss of enhanced pay for Saturdays.

The press release referred fleetingly to the action at Arriva Yorkshire, stating that the ballot which is to open on June 20 and close on July 4 would “place additional pressure on Arriva which is already embroiled in a continuous strike in Yorkshire.”

This is how Unite is maintaining the isolation of pay struggles and dividing bus workers. General Secretary Sharon Graham criticised Arriva North West for choosing to boost profits instead of pay, but went no further than calling on the company to make a “realistic pay offer.”

Arriva bus workers have first-hand experience of what Graham has described as “improved offers.” The sell-out of the pay dispute last November by Unite at Arriva North West was based upon a 3 percent settlement which established the template for a series of below-inflation deals after ending strike action at Arriva Wales and more recently at Arriva London South.

Unite reported on its local Facebook group for the North East, Yorkshire and Humber regarding the Arriva Yorkshire negotiations that “in the interests of finding a resolution to the ongoing dispute, we won’t be making any further statement until those talks conclude.”

This secrecy takes place under conditions in which the company is attempting to drive a wedge between drivers of 3 years+ and lower-paid drivers with shorter service. At the talks last Wednesday, the company reportedly made a further revised offer of 8.2 percent for drivers on the top rate, up from the previous 7 percent bringing the proposed rate after the increase from £13 to £13.15 per hour. This is still well below inflation but drivers on the lower rates have not

received any improved offer. A central demand of Arriva Yorkshire drivers is for parity, ending the intake rate which is currently just £9.79 an hour, to be replaced by new drivers starting at the middle rate and progressing to the top rate in 6 months. The company wants to retain the three years required to reach the top rate.

Unite's regional officer Phil Bown has called only for an uplift of "about 10 percent" across the board. The latest proposals also mean that Selby drivers would continue to receive a far inferior rate of pay than the other four garages.

The strike action has been solid and Arriva Yorkshire has been unable to operate its services across the region. But Unite has not made any appeal to those affected by the disruption. Bown issued an apology but his comment that passengers were "collateral damage" was a gift to the company. The crocodile tears shed by Arriva Yorkshire could have been easily rebuffed. The company has been given carte blanche to run down services, including the reduction in the frequency of its timetable because of its inability to retain drivers due to their degrading pay and working conditions.

Such an appeal is beyond Unite because it does not challenge the control of public transport by the private operators and their singular pursuit of profit that is the source of misery for passengers and the intolerable conditions facing drivers. Arriva Yorkshire has also been able to control the narrative through the media because Unite has not challenged its gagging of bus workers, who have been forbidden from speaking publicly about their dispute.

The focus of this silencing of bus workers has been the censoring of the WSWS by Unite on the picket lines. The coverage of the WSWS has nevertheless continued to attract widespread readership in the tens of thousands and has been welcomed across social media, including among Arriva and other bus workers.

The stand taken at Arriva Yorkshire is an example to all bus workers. It demonstrates the determination and ability of bus workers to stop the private operators in their tracks. The critical question of overcoming the isolation of the dispute now requires the establishment of a rank-and-file committee, as part of a network to coordinate the fightback across Arriva and all the other private operators.

There needs to be direct oversight of the pay

negotiations through workplace meetings in opposition to the behind the scenes scheming between Unite and management. Unite and Bown organised a return to work at Stagecoach Yorkshire during all out action in January before a vote had been taken, which led to acceptance of a below inflation deal and the jettisoning of demands for pay parity between the garages.

- No return to work before the full details of any revised offer have been shared and properly discussed prior to a ballot!

- No concessions or retreat from a cost-of-living increase for all drivers and engineers and parity pay bringing Selby up to the same rates as the other four garages.

- End the three-tier pay system, new starters to progress to top pay in 6 months!

Unite is drawing a veil of secrecy around the talks with Arriva Yorkshire on the eve of the largest national rail strikes in a generation in opposition to the reprivatisation agenda by the Johnson government.

We urge Arriva Yorkshire bus workers to read and share the statement of the Socialist Equality Party, "The British rail strike: Mobilise the entire working class against the Johnson government!"

This outlines a political strategy to mobilise the independent strength of the working class against the Tory government and its de facto allies in the Labour Party, who are lined up behind the agenda of austerity, an unending pandemic and war. What is required is a perspective to challenge the criminal and reckless pursuit of profit by the corporate and financial oligarchy as part of a global fightback by the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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