

UK: Unite suspends Stagecoach Merseyside strike, isolates Arriva Yorkshire workers

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Unite has suspended a one-day strike at Stagecoach Merseyside scheduled for Thursday. Around 370 bus drivers and engineers were due to take part, bringing them into struggle alongside the 650 workers at Arriva Yorkshire now in their fourth week of indefinite strike action.

The union has prevented a second front being opened up in the fight against the private operators equally committed to wage suppression. Its actions are in marked contrast to the vaunted claims of a pushback against the employers made by Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham.

The union has not provided any information publicly on the revised offer presented to Stagecoach bus workers at the Gilmoor depot in Liverpool, where the company trades under the name Ribble Motor Service Ltd. According to the company, the previously rejected pay offer was for 9.5 percent for 2022 and a “further inflationary rate” for next year. With RPI inflation already standing at 11.7 percent, acceptance would have meant a de facto pay cut. If the revised offer is voted down the strike action planned for next Monday will proceed.

Prior to the suspension of the industrial action, Graham trotted out a pro-forma statement claiming that the union will “always challenge employers who make excessive profits by exploiting and underpaying workers.” Despite this rhetoric, Unite had not outlined a pay demand, instead mincing its words with reference to a “fair deal.”

Stagecoach is the largest private bus and coach operator in the UK, operating 25 percent of routes across the country. Its profits more than doubled last year from £16.1 million to £32.9 million.

While Unite had dubbed the company “Filthy Rich,” to falsely align itself with bus workers’ sentiment, the

union has already demonstrated its commitment to protecting profits by pushing through below-inflation deals. In October 2021 bus workers at the Gilmoor depot had a 2.25 percent pay deal foisted on them. Unite also suspended three days of strike action by 250 bus drivers at the Preston and Chorley garages to accept 4.4 percent, which it claimed as a “tremendous victory.”

These agreements were under the RPI rate of inflation at the time of 4.8 percent and covered a period up to April and May this year, respectively, with workers falling ever further behind the cost of living.

At Arriva Yorkshire, 650 bus workers at five depots in west and north Yorkshire have now entered the fourth week of continuous strike action which has brought services across the region to a grinding halt. Their determined stand to refuse anything less than a cost-of-living increase has barely been reported by the Unite, when it should serve as a rallying point for wider action.

The union’s silence continued throughout last week during the national rail strikes, which mobilised 40,000 workers in defence of their jobs and in opposition to the pay restraint and the gutting of their terms and conditions. This is all the more inexcusable since bus workers and rail workers are engaged in a fight against the same transport companies. Arriva Group is a major bus and rail operator, with two of its rail franchises—CrossCountry and Chiltern Railways—among the 13 train operators who were hit by last week’s action.

Around 1,800 bus workers at Arriva North West are currently voting in a strike ballot closing July 4 over a maximum pay offer of just 3 percent, or 6 percent with strings attached—including reductions in sick pay and loss of enhanced pay for Saturdays. This is advance

warning that any marginally improved pay offer on pitiful amounts touted by the union will be conditional on overturning terms and conditions.

Since November last year the company has been dependent on Unite to suppress or isolate strike action, starting at Arriva North West, then Arriva Wales and last month at Arriva South London. It has imposed sell-out deals keeping pay agreements well below inflation at between 3 and 3.5 percent. The few exceptions to the rule of outright wage suppression have been confined to smaller sections of bus workers. These agreements have pre-empted any strike action in which larger pay increases could have been won.

Graham has hailed as “inflation busting” a recent 15.8 percent pay agreement at Stagecoach which covers a single garage in Worthing in the south of England. The one-year deal is being paid in three instalments.

Unite has likewise foregrounded a two-year agreement for 13.3 percent covering 180 drivers is at Leicester Citybus. The franchise is operated by First Group, another highly profitable company which paid out £500 million in dividends to shareholders last year. The union claims the deal is indexed to inflation based upon an agreement that the company will re-enter negotiations if the RPI rate is 5.5 percent or more in 10 months’ time. This only means that Unite is committed to more behind-closed-doors talks with the company to suppress strike action.

In opposition to this divide and rule policy there is a broad-based sentiment for nationwide action by bus workers who recognise that a successful struggle cannot be waged at a local level. The pandemic and the key role of bus workers has reinforced a sense of class unity against companies who have treated their lives as so much cannon fodder in defence of their bottom line. This has led to demands for ending pay disparity—even between garages in the same bargaining units—and significantly inferior terms for newer entrants.

Unite has not made these elementary demands, exposing the inaccuracy of the term “union” to describe an organisation which facilitates the division of workers on behalf of the employers. While workers are striving to reverse the impact of decades of privatisation, the message from Graham is to accept chump change.

Unite is seeking to deepen its corporatist relations with the private operators by guaranteeing industrial

peace. It has been the key mechanism in holding back a strike wave in the industry for the last year, ensuring that 20 pay disputes across the Stagecoach network did not translate into national action. The net result of this has been a further lowering of bus workers’ pay in the face of rampant inflation. The two significant strikes it was unable to prevent were kept isolated and ended with sellout agreements falsely packaged as “victories.” It has followed the same playbook at Arriva.

To fight against both the employers and Unite’s sabotage, bus workers need genuine organisations of struggle—a network of rank-and-file committees which will break down the sectional divisions and expand disputes. A genuine pay struggle must be combined with opposition to the new benchmarks of exploitation demanded by the bus companies, including reduced break times and sick pay and the lengthening of working hours. It also requires the fight for the adoption of emergency health measures against COVID-19 as bus workers are once again left defenceless on the frontline against a resurgence of the pandemic.

We encourage all 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!”, which outlines a program of industrial and political struggle. It explains:

“The prospect of a general strike is real, due to widespread sentiment for defeating and bringing down a despised government whose austerity drive, ‘let rip’ response to COVID-19, and reckless warmongering have produced untold suffering. But this must become the conscious aim of the emerging movement.

“The ruling class wants to finish the job Thatcher began in 1984, when she set out to break the miners to end all opposition to her social counter-revolution. The working class must seize the opportunity to revenge that defeat and reverse the decades of betrayals and losses that followed.”



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