

UK: Unite suspends strike action at Arriva Yorkshire before a vote on revised offer

Tony Robson
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On Thursday Unite suspended all-out strike action by 560 bus workers across five garages at Arriva Yorkshire as it entered a fourth week.

The union organised a return to work on Saturday before a ballot has been held on a revised offer. It has ridden roughshod over its membership in collusion with management.

Unite regional officer Phil Bown stated, “Arriva has come forward with an offer which our members will now be balloted on. While the ballot is being undertaken and as an act of goodwill Unite has suspended its strike action.”

This has allowed Arriva to present the revised agreement as a done deal. Gavin Peace, Area Operating Director for Arriva North East & Yorkshire stated, “It is fantastic news that we have reached an agreement with Unite and from this Saturday, we can start to reinstate bus services across Yorkshire.”

The “goodwill” between Unite and Arriva is because they are working together to exert maximum pressure on bus workers to abandon their fight for a cost-of-living increase. Since the all-out strike began on June 6, Arriva Yorkshire has mounted a media witch-hunt against bus workers while Unite enforced a public gagging order against strikers speaking out against the company and appealing for support.

The WSWs spoke with drivers at garages in Castleford and Selby on Saturday, who explained they had yet to receive a copy of the revised offer from Unite and that balloting would only start this week with the results announced the following Tuesday.

Workers at the five garages had voted by a majority 96 percent for the strike after rejecting a 4.1 percent offer. Pay is as low as £9.79 an hour for new drivers, who remain on just 29 pence more than the minimum wage for a year.

A revised offer was considered so derisory by workers that it was not put formally to a vote and they proceeded to strike. Arriva Yorkshire described as “generous” the improved offer, claiming it was worth between 7 percent and 12.5 percent. But the higher amount only applied to drivers at Selby garage who are employed on inferior pay and terms with the top rate proposed for drivers there £1.50 an hour less than those at the other four garages. Most drivers would have received around a 7 percent uplift, a de facto pay cut with RPI inflation at 11.7 percent.

Unite is treating its members with contempt, sending them back to work without an agreed deal after spending nearly four weeks on the picket line and sacrificing income with just £70 a day strike pay. Unite announced June 20 that it would not be publicly reporting on further negotiations following the failure of two previous rounds of talks. As late as Tuesday, two days before the suspension, Unite stated that the company had put forward a “regurgitated offer” which it had rejected twice.

Bown used an interview with *ITV Calendar News* Thursday to essentially recommend the deal. His previous protestations about drivers having to work 40 to 50 hours a week to make up for low pay or visit foodbanks and call for a 10 percent or inflation related agreement were junked. “We’ve done our best to try and find an offer which brings our drivers back up to a decent level of pay,” he said. “We believe that this offer goes a long way to do that. We’d like more, obviously everybody would like more. But obviously at this point in time we feel it’s a fair offer to put back to our membership for their deliberations.”

The veil of secrecy over the talks Unite imposed from June 20 has extended to its members as it cooked up a sell-out deal with the company and worked to isolate

the strike. Bus workers and members of Unite at Arriva Harts and Bucks have voted for strike action and at Arriva North West 1,800 bus workers opened a ballot to strike against a 3 percent offer or 6 percent with strings.

The suspension of the strike at Arriva Yorkshire came only days after Unite brought back a revised offer to suspend strike action at Stagecoach Merseyside by 370 bus drivers and engineers at the Gilmoor depot in Liverpool. This was voted down and strike action scheduled for Monday has gone ahead, with a further seven one day stoppages planned to the end of the month.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated in a press release that Gilmoor bus workers will continue to receive the “full support” of the union, decrying the fact that Stagecoach was “making money hand over fist.” This is two-faced. The union was prepared to avert strike action based upon a meagre revision from the previous offer of 9.5 percent to 10.3 percent, a difference of 0.8 percent. Gilmoor bus workers were saddled with a pay agreement of just 2.25 percent from 2021 to this year as Unite set about preventing national action at the UK’s largest bus operator.

Graham’s claim since election last August of rebuilding Unite as a “member led” union and waging a push back against employers is a fraud. It has been a regroupment exercise led by a career bureaucrat mobilising a narrow base of support among regional and local officials against a unified movement from below. This has involved enforcing divisions and sell-out agreements including at Arriva across the UK of between 3 and 3.5 percent. Unite does not function as a union to defend workers interests, but to stifle all resistance to deepen its corporatist relations with the employers to safeguard their profits.

Arriva Yorkshire bus workers should reject any retreat from their demand for a cost-of-living increase and for new entrants to be brought up to the top rate in six months to end the multi-tier wage system. Any deal which reneges on these demands or contains strings should be thrown out.

A rank-and-file committee should be formed to wage this fight. This would provide a spring board for ending the isolation of their dispute and joining up with Arriva workers nationally waging the same fight as well as at Stagecoach and all other private operators.

Only days after the strike was suspended at Arriva Yorkshire, it was announced that 62 bus routes would be cut across the west Yorkshire region 11 percent of the bus network by mileage—as part of at least 135 routes to be axed across England. This is in response to the Johnson governments ending of COVID subsidies in October. The private operators have been bailed out to the tune of £2 billion since March 2020. With passenger numbers returning to around three quarters of pre-pandemic levels, losses are to be passed on to bus workers and transport users.

Bus workers are not engaged in a fight against individual employers, but a government committed to making the working class pay for its bailout of the corporate oligarchy. They are confronted with the same struggle as rail workers against the plans to re-privatise the railways through a new model guaranteeing the profits of the private operators dominating the bus and rail network.



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