

Unite suspends strike action again at Arriva Yorkshire as an act of “good faith”

Tony Robson
14 July 2022

In extraordinary scenes on Wednesday around 650 Arriva Yorkshire bus workers, picketing five garages after rejecting a third below-inflation pay offer on the first day of their renewed strike, were instructed by Unite that all action was to be suspended.

Phil Bown, Unite regional officer, called this an act of “good faith” to the company—one based solely on a promise by senior managers of a new and undisclosed “substantial offer”.

Arriva has been given free license to renege on any such promises in talks Friday, with Unite guaranteeing it will provide 14 days’ notice before any further action.

This is the second time Bown has extended good will to the company on behalf of Unite. His previous “good faith” gesture was suspending all-out strike action as it entered its fourth week and organising a return to work on July 2 before a revised offer had even been put to a vote by the membership.

Arriva and Unite are working hand in glove to defeat the resistance of bus workers fighting for a genuine pay increase.

On Tuesday, Arriva Yorkshire workers rejected what the company had described as its “final offer”, under conditions in which the return to work was being used to present the new agreement as a foregone conclusion. The company emphasised its common purpose with Unite, announcing that “all parties will work together to progress the pay offer.” The union delayed releasing any details of the deal to workers, but Bown briefed the media saying it was the best possible outcome to the dispute.

In the face of this line-up, Arriva Yorkshire bus workers voted to reject the revised deal by 53.7 percent. Drivers told WSWS they were being offered a £1 an hour increase across the board. This equates to just over

8 percent for senior drivers at the top rate on £12.15 an hour, and a little more than 10 percent for new drivers—a de facto pay cut with RPI inflation at 11.7 percent. In the case of new drivers, the higher percentage only applies because their hourly rate is £9.79—just 29 pence above the minimum wage.

Unite’s press release Tuesday announcing workers’ rejection of the deal barely disguised its disappointment. Unite accused management of meddling in the democratic vote “by pressurising workers to accept the deal”. However, its opposition to these strong-arm tactics was purely because they had prevented Unite from organising a sell-out.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham declared, “Tensions have needlessly been raised by Arriva’s management meddling during the ballot. The company’s actions have severely backfired. It is entirely Arriva’s own fault that the strikes are back on.”

Graham demanded that Arriva come back with an “improved offer”, saying “as part of a global transport giant, it can afford to do so.” Similar vague calls for “improved offers” have been made repeatedly by Unite in place of the demand for a genuine cost-of-living increase. Since last November, below-inflation deals at Arriva UK Bus of between 3 and 3.5 percent have been hailed as “victories” with Unite blocking, suppressing and isolating strike action.

Arriva Yorkshire bus workers can place no confidence in Graham, Bown and their negotiating team’s faithful regurgitations of management promises. The only reason they have not been saddled with a de facto pay cut by now is because their resistance has cut across Unite’s back-door machinations with Arriva.

These developments confirm the warnings made by the WSWS and underscore its call for the establishment

by workers of a rank-and-file committee to take the dispute out of the hands of the Unite bureaucracy. The demand for a cost-of-living increase and parity pay must be waged by those who are prepared to fight for what workers need and not what Arriva claims is affordable to protect its profits.

Such a struggle entails a company-wide fight against Unite's divide-and-rule tactics that are cutting off Arriva Yorkshire workers from the broader resistance developing among bus and transport workers.

Around 1,800 bus workers at Arriva North West across 11 garages in Liverpool, Manchester and the north west region delivered a 96 percent majority strike vote with all-out action scheduled for July 20. They have rejected a 3 percent offer or 6 percent with strings including reduced sick pay and loss of Saturday enhanced pay.

All out-strike action by 370 bus workers at Stagecoach Merseyside's Gilmooss depot in Liverpool had been scheduled to start the same day. But Unite once again suspended the two-day strike this Friday and next Monday to ballot on a new offer to end the dispute. The union stated the offer had been "agreed between Stagecoach's management and Unite."

An earlier one day strike at Gilmooss depot on July 4 only happened because a revised offer backed by Unite for 10.3 percent had been rejected after the union suspended strike action the previous Thursday. Stagecoach Merseyside management confirmed that Unite had backed the revised offer as well as an earlier 9.7 percent proposal voted down by its membership.

The Gilmooss garage was saddled with one the lowest pay agreements last year of 2.25 percent because of the divide and rule policy enforced by Unite at Stagecoach, the largest private bus operator in the UK. Unite justified its refusal to present a joint pay claim across all Stagecoach franchises citing the pretext of anti-strike legislation. Instead, in November of last year it allowed mandates to accumulate nationally while keeping them divided.

Unite lead officer for passenger transport Bobby Morton described this approach as "sitting on our hands across the bargaining units". In the hands of Unite this "leverage" policy, championed by Graham, was used to avert national strike action. In exchange for improved pay offers the company was able to negotiate agreements which varied across the country with the

vast majority below the rate of inflation. Unite whittled down 20 pay disputes to just 3 strikes.

At the Durham Miners Gala last week, Graham claimed that Unite was leading a rebirth of the trade unions through a tireless struggle on behalf of the working class. She stated that no change in the law was required to mount co-ordinated industrial action, "We are beginning to co-ordinate action, anniversary dates, inside the union across numerous employers on the buses and beyond."

The events of this past week along with Unite's ongoing attempts to sabotage the growing resistance of bus workers against wage suppression by the private operators should serve to burst the bubble of Sharon Graham and her claims of leading a string of "pay victories". Behind empty militant rhetoric the apparatus of the bureaucracy is marshalled to suppress every expression of the class struggle that conflicts with the subordination of society to the profit interests of the corporate oligarchy.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact