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

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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 Gilmoss 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 Gilmoss 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 Gilmoss 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