

Arriva North West bus drivers speak as strike begins

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Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with Arriva North West bus drivers on the picket line Wednesday at the firm’s Wythenshawe depot in Manchester as they began an all-out strike over pay. Workers walked out at 11 depots across the region.

A driver said they had been in dispute for a few months as “the anniversary of the pay talks was in April and that’s when pay talks start and we’ve had a couple of poor offers.

“We’re facing unprecedented times, as everyone is, and we do a very responsible job.

“Originally, they tried to buy some of our conditions off us in exchange for a pay rise and we said no. They want to take sick pay and pay breaks. We don’t get pay breaks at our depot but some others do. A pay break means if you have a meal break you get paid through it. They wanted to talk about sick pay cuts and we said no. Currently the first two days when we are sick are unpaid and they were talking about making it three unpaid.

“They tried to take Saturday enhanced pay that they only gave us last November. You get an extra 25 percent, basically time and a quarter for working Saturday and Sunday.

“When we got that offer RPI was already at 8 percent and now its 11 percent.

“Public transport has got to be funded properly and it’s not down to bus drivers to fund it themselves.”

Another driver said, “A big issue is that we all do the same job within the same company but different garages get more money than us. It doesn’t make sense.”

The strike was necessitated by staggering price increases, the driver said. “The cost of living now is

really high. I used to pay £120 a month for gas and electricity at home. Now they are asking to go to £240. Petrol has gone from 85p a litre to £2 a litre. It’s more than doubled. We used to get 1 or 2 percent pay rises but that’s not going to work this time is it?”

Another worker said, “Mine [gas and electric bill] has gone from £135 to £311 a month. The company are panicking because the subsidies they got off the government in the pandemic will run out in September.”

A number of workers told the WSWs that earning just £13 an hour meant they could not support their family. One said they “had earned under £500 a week doing a basic 37 hours a week. If you have a wife and kids to support, I would say it’s not viable. A single man with no kids, you could live on that, but not someone with a family.” He added that due to the pressure of the job, he would not work a six-day week, as many workers were having to do in an attempt to stay afloat.

Another worker interjected that some drivers at the depot worked a six-day week and some even seven days a week. The driver said, “You’re only allowed by law to work 13 days out of every 14 and we have some people here working the 13 days and then have a day off and working another 13. Long hours is a problem in this industry and they are unsociable hour too. It’s a safety concern”.

The worker described the situation as so bad on occasions that home was similar to a “bed and breakfast.” He said, “Sometimes, you’re going home and you’re up for two hours and then you go to bed and then you are back here again. At this depot we have the worst parameters [work hours] in the whole of Arriva.”

A colleague agreed saying, “The first bus is out before 4am and the last bus is back after 1am.”

Despite a contracted 37-hour working week, “At this depot we’re all averaging between 40 and 44 hours a week. It’s enforced overtime when you look at it from the standpoint that we have a 37-hour contract.”

The workers at the Wythenshawe depot last struck over pay in 2017. A driver told the WSWs, “I don’t think that we’ve ever had a pay rise that registers anywhere near what we need for the job. This pay rise should have been given to us in April and now we’re in July.

“It needs to be brought to the public’s attention. The hours we are made to work here are ridiculous. It’s got worse over the last 10 years.”

Others spoke about the company’s disregard for their wellbeing, after drivers risked their safety and lives working during the pandemic.

WSWS reporters pointed to the situation in London this week where some drivers refused to work after temperatures soared to life-threatening levels inside their cabs. A driver agreed saying, “Look at yesterday and the day before, we were cooking in the cabs.” Another said, “I heard that some of the mini bus drivers here became ill with heat exhaustion and went home as they couldn’t work in the heat it was so unbearable.” Another added, “There should be air conditioning in the driver’s cab but that doesn’t happen because it’s not cost effective for the company. People need to know about the conditions we are working in.”

A driver pointed out, “With a full bus we have 33 standing and 35 sitting down. So, we hold more on our buses than class 2 drivers do and they’re on 14 or 15 pounds an hour. We are carrying live, unsecure cargo on buses.”

Another worker said, “Look what happened to us during COVID when we risked our lives, we got a letter posted on the depot door to say thank you.” Another interjected, “Don’t forget, we also got the cheapest box of Celebrations [assorted sweets] and they were out of date. They were worth about £3 and that is the thanks we got.” One commented, “We’re also losing toilet facilities and canteens. There’s just no thought for our health.” A driver pointed out that although no one died at the depot during the first years of the pandemic “one driver was really bad with it and he’s still ill now.”

Another summarised the company’s attitude to the workforce: “All they are interested in is bums on seats, drive the bus, and they don’t give a shit about anything else. They can make you do any hours. Even the guys doing a straight 13 days and then one day off, those hours are not a row of early shifts, middles or lates, they are all different hours.”

Another driver speaking on the pay offer explained, “The offer is dismal but it’s not just the pay, it’s everything. The working conditions are not good either. What the company don’t see is that it’s us the workers who create the wealth. They don’t see this and don’t want to pay us what we are worth.”

Asked about the many workers in the bus and transport industry who are coming forward in struggle, he replied, “We are not mega militant at this department but we are class conscious and we can see what is happening to us and other workers and everyone deserves better, and we would welcome a mass strike.” On the issue of the war in Ukraine he stated, “We are being made to pay for the war with fuel costs, food costs. We are made to pay for it all.”

An older driver, who recalled the 1979 “winter of discontent” of mass industrial struggles against a Labour government and the 1984-85 miners’ strike against Thatcher’s Conservative government, said, “This is the summer of discontent and a mass strike is needed because companies like individual strikes because they are easier to break.”

Speaking about NATO’s proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the growing tensions between China and the US over Taiwan, he said, “I really believe we are very close to nuclear war. All people want is to be able to live their lives, but the corrupt people at the top and the mega rich are taking everything.”



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