

Arriva North West bus workers begin all-out strike against below inflation pay offer

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Around 1,800 bus workers at Arriva North West started an all-out strike today in the fight for a cost-of-living pay increase across 11 garages—Birkenhead, Bolton, Bootle, Liverpool, Macclesfield, Manchester, Runcorn, Southport, Speke, St Helens, and Winsford. The wage rates for bus drivers vary across the bargaining unit with those at Winsford on £11.08 an hour.

The Unite members—mainly bus drivers—returned a vote for strike action on July 5 by a resounding majority of 96 percent on a 72 percent turnout. They rejected offers of either 3 percent, or 6 percent with strings including reductions in sick pay and ending enhanced payments for Saturday working.

Even with the sweeping concessions demanded, the higher pay offer is still half the rate of inflation which has reached 11.8 percent RPI. A further revised offer of 8.5 percent from the company tabled last week was rejected without a vote as workers deemed it unfit to even ballot over.

Arriva North West has denounced the opposition as “unjustified”. Its parent company DB Group saw revenues rise by 18.4 percent in 2021 to €47.3 billion. Net profit was €5 billion as the company raked in taxpayer funded subsidies through the £2 billion COVID relief fund paid out by the Johnson government in England alone to 150 bus and light rail operators.

Arriva reported that the industrial action will bring services to a standstill across Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire. There were large turnouts on the picket lines including in Manchester, in Speke and at Old Swan—the main depot and city HQ of Arriva in Liverpool—with Unite and GMB union members present. The GMB union represents workers involved in the dispute but has not provided any reporting.

The pay struggle is also fuelled by a injustice over the disregard for bus workers’ safety throughout the pandemic. Then officially proclaimed heroes, they are now expected to accept poverty level wages. Any work-life balance has been replaced with punishing rosters without sufficient rest days, leading to stress and exhaustion and a sentiment that “enough is enough.”

Workers would be taking strike action at Arriva North West alongside hundreds of other bus workers at Arriva UK Bus and Stagecoach were it not for the role of Unite. Contrary to claims falsely made by General Secretary Sharon Graham at the recent Durham Miners’ Gala, the union is not co-ordinating action on the buses, only sellout pay agreements to suppress a strike wave.

Stagecoach Merseyside was set to be hit by all-out strike action by 370 bus workers at the Gillmoss depot in Liverpool, due to start on the same day as Arriva North West.

But after just a single one-day strike on July 4, a further two days of stoppages leading up to the all-out action at Stagecoach Merseyside were suspended by Unite to put a revised offer it had “agreed with the company.” This follows two previous revised offers of 9.5 percent and 10.3 percent which Unite endorsed and brought back to its membership which were voted down. The latter offer was also used as a pretext to suspend strike action.

On Monday, Unite announced that the new offer had been accepted, claiming it had “secured a substantial pay increase” to end the dispute. Graham shamelessly claims credit after the union tried to enforce the previous inferior proposals.

The revised offer only contains minor modifications to the most recently rejected. The hourly rate for bus

drivers will increase from £12.69 to £14.00 backdated to March, a 10.3 percent increase. This will be followed by an increase to £14.20—an overall increase of 11.9 percent—but only from January 2023. Engineers will receive an increase of 10.3 percent from March this year with a further 1.45 percent from January 2023. The commitment to an RPI increase or 2 percent, whichever is higher, is delayed until March 2023. Graham has described Stagecoach as “Filthy Rich” but the union has sliced and diced a two-year agreement, the overarching aim of which is to protect the profits of the largest private bus operator in the UK.

At Arriva Yorkshire, 650 bus workers across five garages in the west and north of the county waged an all-out strike over pay from June 6 to June 30 when Unite suspended the action. The union organised a return to work on a revised offer before balloting its membership.

Unite again backed a sub-standard deal of between 8 and 10 percent. The higher end of the pay offer only applied to the lowest paid section of drivers, earning just £9.79 an hour. The demand to lift new drivers to the top rate of £12.15 an hour after six months was abandoned by the union. Unite regional officer Phil Bown promoted the revised offer as the best available even before bus workers had seen the details and had a chance to vote.

Bus workers voted down the revised proposals described by the company as its final offer by 53.7 percent on July 12 in the face of management intimidation and the union’s underhand methods.

When drivers returned to the picket line the day after, they were informed by Unite that the strike would be suspended yet again from Friday while the union re-entered talks with the company. Bown described this as an act of “good faith” to the company—the second time such bonhomie has been expressed in suspending strike action during the dispute.

Communications from a local Unite branch secretary at Arriva Yorkshire make it clear how committed Unite was to pushing the deal. They stated, “Whilst I can commend you all for the huge turn out to deliver a democratic result it’s not good news, Those in favour were 305. Those against were 353.”

After announcing this, the statement explained that Unite was rushing back into talks with management without any briefings with bus workers: “This will be

the last comms I send out, so you are aware, until we return.”

Following more backroom negotiations with management, from which the company has stated it has reached an agreement with the union, members will be balloted later this week. This is the cycle bus workers are subjected to at the hands of the Unite bureaucracy, which has turned pay negotiations into a travesty from the standpoint of a genuine pay fight. The union brings back an endless round of substandard offers to the membership, while it sabotages strike action.

At Arriva North West, Arriva Yorkshire or Stagecoach Merseyside bus workers are posed with the same task of taking the fight out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. Last November, Unite suspended strike action twice at Arriva North West to push through a below inflation pay deal of 3 percent which it endorsed through a joint statement with the GMB and management.

The only way to defeat the sweetheart pay deals between the unions and the private operators is through the formation of rank-and-file committees led by trusted militants who will fight for a pay demand which put bus workers’ needs before the profits of the private operators.

The fight for a cost-of-living increase cannot be won on the basis of a sectional approach. It should be advanced through collective struggle across the networks with the demand to lift the level of wages throughout Britain and end the pay disparities between bus drivers performing the same job and facing the same cost-of-living crisis. Such a fight can only be advanced in opposition to Unite and the pro-company divisions and multi-tier pay, terms and conditions system it upholds in propping up the privatised bus network.



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