

UK: The Arriva-Unite below inflation pay deal pushed through in Yorkshire after strike action suspended twice

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The all-out strike by around 1,800 bus workers at Arriva North West is in its third week with services brought to a standstill across Liverpool, Manchester and many other towns across the region. The action is as solid as when it started on July 20.

The strike by members of the Unite and GMB unions covers 11 garages—Birkenhead, Bolton, Bootle, Liverpool, Macclesfield, Manchester, Runcorn, Southport, Speke, St Helens, and Winsford. Wage rates vary across the bargaining unit, with those at Winsford on just £11.08 an hour. Bus drivers have rejected attempts by the company to end the dispute based on a revised offer of 8.5 percent—little more than two thirds of the current inflation rate and to be awarded in two instalments.

Besides pay, Arriva North West bus workers have spoken out over highly exploitative conditions. Unite and the GMB have not referenced these critical issues in any press releases or their highly limited coverage of the dispute.

Unite has divided Arriva North West bus workers from those at Stagecoach Merseyside and Arriva Yorkshire, where Unite brought back below-inflation pay deals preventing joint action which would have provided the basis to win a genuine cost-of-living pay increase.

A picket at Arriva in Manchester told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I think that all of them should get together; Stagecoach, Arriva, and others, and all fight together.”

It is high time to call out the duplicitous role played by Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and the regional and local bureaucracy through the “Combine” (industry wide union committee). Their claims to be winning pay victories and organising co-ordinated action against the private transport operators is refuted by all experience.

The fight for a cost-of-living increase and parity pay by

650 bus workers at Arriva Yorkshire across five garages ended last month on July 26 after they had taken four weeks of action just as determined as their brothers and sisters at Arriva North West.

According to Unite’s version of events, a “vastly improved offer” was made.

But even by the union’s own admission, the deal is worth 9 percent on average, well below the 11.8 percent RPI rate inflation, and less than the goal of “about 10 percent” stated by Unite regional officer Phil Bown.

Graham regularly comments that pay settlements need to be based on the RPI rate but Unite does the opposite in practice. She said of Arriva Yorkshire, “This was a superb result for our members. Through their unity and determination, they have ensured that Arriva more than doubled its original offer.”

During the all-out strike action which started on June 6, Arriva Yorkshire bus workers refused to even consider balloting over revised offers from the company of around 7 and then 8 percent.

The “unity” and “determination” of strikers were against acceptance of such a substandard deal. If the same criteria for victory of doubling the employer’s original offer were applied to Arriva North West, Unite would be praising a 6 percent agreement.

Unite originally suspended strike action and organised a return to work at Arriva Yorkshire on July 2, without bus drivers seeing—let alone voting on—a revised offer described as “final” by management. The joint management-union deal for around a £1-an-hour increase across the board—between 8 and 10 percent—was voted down by bus workers. However, as soon as they returned to the picket line July 13 the strike was suspended yet again by Unite as another act of “good faith” to the company. The union again organised a return to work for

two days later as it went back into talks with management

No matter how many times bus workers rejected rotten deals, Unite was fully committed to imposing a below-inflation award with Arriva. The agreement to end the dispute is not substantially different from the so-called final deal.

At the centre of the dispute was the call for parity pay. The demand was adopted for new drivers to move up to the top band of pay after six months on the job.

The Arriva-Unite agreement leaves the tier system intact. New starters will begin at a higher rate of £10.84, rather than £9.79 an hour. However, this is still below the rate which existed before for those with 12-36 months service at four of the five garages of £10.91 an hour.

The raise amounts to a 10.7 percent increase at this tier because drivers were paid only 29 pence more than the minimum wage before, and is still below inflation, even for the lowest paid. According to Unite, the agreement means that those with three years' service will receive £13.20 as opposed to £12.15 an hour—an increase of around 8.6 percent.

The grossly misnamed Unite divides bus workers at the most elementary level reflecting the fact it does not represent its members but the interests of management and the company.

Throughout the Arriva Yorkshire strike the union bureaucracy instructed workers on picket lines not to speak to the WSWS. This is because of its record of principled struggle among bus workers and in industrial struggles more broadly.

That record includes the campaign for workers' protection against COVID-19 by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee (LBRFC) and the fight against the victimisation of David O'Sullivan. The Committee took up the unofficial action by London bus drivers who walked off the job during this summer's heatwave over unsafe working temperatures and non-functioning air condition systems, while Unite left its members to work until they dropped.

In the bus company pay disputes, the WSWS has consistently of the consequences of isolating struggles and of impending sellouts by the union, fighting to mobilise bus workers in opposition. Shortly before the dispute in Yorkshire, a below inflation deal was pushed through in May by Unite at Arriva London South following three days of industrial action. The WSWS provided a platform for bus drivers to speak out and expose the rotten deal and the LBRFC organised online meetings with drivers from the garages to rally opposition.

Unite upholds an anti-democratic ban on bus workers speaking to the media about disputes and appealing to other workers for support. This is to enable the bureaucracy to control the narrative while it prepares a betrayal.

As far as Graham's "victories" are concerned, bus workers cannot afford any more! Repackaged below inflation deals are enforced by sabotaging strike action, protecting the profit margins of the private operators.

New rank-and-file organisations are necessary to for bus workers to take the fight into their own hands and open up a new path of struggle. The LBRFC calls on workers to rally around the action at Arriva North West, against the efforts of Unite and the private operators to suppress strike action nationally. Its latest statement urges:

"Delegations should also visit workers on indefinite strike at Arriva North West who are facing the same attacks on pay and conditions.

"To lead this fight, independent rank-and-file committees are needed led by trusted militants that will place the interests of workers before company profits. The current pay claims must be redrawn to reflect the concerns of workers, including an end to divisive pay grades: one job, one wage across *all* operators.

"Agency staff must be transferred in-house on full benefits; compulsory sick-pay must be available for all drivers from day one. Safety must be strictly enforced! Bans on all defective vehicles which place drivers and passengers at risk. We urge all bus workers who agree with this fight to contact us today."



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