

UK bus workers' determined strike at Arriva North West continues, as GMB union declares for "compromise"

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Around 1,800 UK bus workers at Arriva North West are continuing their all-out strike for a pay increase to meet the rising cost of living. The strike began on July 20 and is into its third week.

While workers are determined to fight on, the GMB union has indicated it is ready to secure a sellout deal with the company. At the same time, Unite has sabotaged a growing strike wave of bus workers by opposing unified, collective action.

The GMB and Unite union members work at 11 garages across the north west of England, including Birkenhead, Bolton, Bootle, Liverpool, Macclesfield, Manchester, Runcorn, Southport, Speke, St Helens, and Winsford.

Workers voted by an overwhelming 96 percent on a 72 percent turnout to reject the company's initial offer of either 3 percent, or 6 percent with strings. A further 8.5 percent offer was rejected without a ballot as being substantially below inflation, currently at 11.8 percent RPI. The Bank of England predicts even the lower CPI inflation rate will rise to 13 percent in the last three months of this year from its current 9.4 percent—the highest level for 42 years—and will remain "very elevated" in 2023.

In a July 29 press release, GMB Organiser Robert Marnell said, "[T]he GMB stands ready to talk when all parties are ready to get round the table and compromise... These workers are struggling to make ends meet—Arriva needs to recognise that and make them an offer that helps them cope with the cost of living crisis."

The GMB baldly states it will "compromise", which means settling for a below inflation deal they can sell to their members, on the basis that it is the best that can be achieved. But to cope with the rising cost of living—including average energy bills for the average household predicted to soar past £3,000 in the autumn and

rising mortgage rates—the working class must demand wage rises index linked to the cost of living, and backdated to include compensation for the erosion of real terms pay since 2008.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking bus workers on the picket line outside bus depots in Liverpool, and Wythenshawe in Manchester.

Strikers expressed their concerns about the cost of living, and how to take their struggle forward.

In Liverpool, driver John declared, "If it carries on the way it is, it's only going one way. Everyone's going to be in dire straits, if things keep going up.

"Capitalism isn't working. [What we want] is enough money to put food on the table and keep a roof over our heads, and we're not getting railroaded.

"Everything's always being fuelled by money. If they can make money by destroying what's there, they'll do it."

Discussing the role of the Labour Party, John said, "I've always voted Labour, but I think I'm a bit lost at the minute. [But] we don't want to go down communism." When the WSWs reporter explained the history of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the internationalist programme fought for by the Trotskyist movement, he responded, "We've never had socialism."

Expressing the basic principle that "unity is strength", he said of the growing number of workers in dispute, "We all need to come out on a general strike."

Another driver, Bill, a veteran on the buses, said, "Unless you're getting an inflation rise, you're not getting a pay rise. Unless you're all willing to come out at the same time, you'll get nowhere. We need a new mindset."

Driver Jeff, who has worked for Arriva for four years, explained why the Arriva workers had walked out.

“We’re striking about wages and shift patterns—there’s no consistency,” he said. “The tiredness... when you finish at eight at night and they want you back at 6 am! If a driver is tired, and worries about safety, they’ll discipline you.”

“They [the company] offered another deal yesterday—if you’ve worked for 12 months or less, £12 an hour, that’s a £1 increase; if it’s one to five years, 7.5 percent; and over five years, 9 percent. They’re trying to come between us. We all should be paid the same doing the same job.”

“If they offered me £20 an hour, I’d stay out with these,” he said, pointing to his workmates on the picket line. “If one’s out, we’re all out.”

“Around 10 percent of the people in the world own all the wealth... Most of us worked through the pandemic and we got nothing,” he said, adding, “We got a thank you letter.”

At the Wythenshawe depot, driver Alan said, “We’re solid, still full out and we are not going to stop. This is about young people, their mortgages, their lives.”

With reference to the recent union/company meeting to resolve the dispute, he said, “Management are still singing from the same song sheet, where they had offered a £250 bonus. We turned it down. It’s getting that bad now, your money is going nowhere,” he said, adding “We cannot go on accepting 2 percent, 3 percent, 4 percent. These offers don’t cut the mustard.”

A fellow picket agreed saying, “I cannot even afford to get to work; that’s before you make any money!”

Driver Jim said, “We’ve been sending lads to other depots. We’ve been going to other depots telling them that we are still strong.”

While workers recognise that workers can only wage a successful fight if united, they face not just the transport companies but the GMB and Unite, which are corporatist organisations that side with big business to enforce attacks on jobs, pay and conditions. The union bureaucracy seek to suppress strike mandates but where there are forced to sanction them due to pressure from their members, they then work to limit and isolate them, within companies and between sectors, in order to browbeat acceptance of below inflation pay deals, voluntary redundancies and/or attacks on terms and conditions.

Unite has suppressed a potential unified strike wave among its members at Arriva North West, Arriva Yorkshire, and Stagecoach Merseyside. At Arriva

Yorkshire it backed a substandard deal worth between eight and 10 percent, after workers walked out for two weeks. At Stagecoach Merseyside, after a single day’s strike, Unite pushed through a 10.3 percent increase, rising to 11.9 percent from January 2023, so wages again will not keep pace with inflation.

Arriva North West, part of Arriva UK, is owned by German parent company Deutsche Bahn. In an article on its website, Unite cites research it commissioned revealing “in the last 10 years a total of £560 million has been paid in dividends from Arriva’s UK bus division to the parent company Deutsche Bahn. During that time bus workers in Arriva North West have contributed an estimated £60 million to the company’s bonanza profits.”

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham commented, “Rather than invest in its own workforce Arriva has been milking profits and offshoring them to Germany.”

According to Unite, Deutsche Bahn is one of the largest companies in the world and is “effectively owned by the German government”. It is “extremely profitable and has paid dividends of £5 billion to the German government.”

The Unite piece continues, “Since the pandemic began UK bus companies including Arriva have received considerable financial support from the UK government... Unite asks whether UK taxpayers money has actually—through offshoring—found its way into German government’s coffers?”

This nationalist appeal diverts workers from the necessary class struggle across workplaces, subsidiaries and national borders. Multinational companies, British and German alike, exploit employees all over the world. The point is not to call on hostile governments to re-shore the profits, but to mount a collective fight which stops such vast fortunes being clawed out of the backs of the international working class in the first place. Unite makes no mention of the wages and conditions of workers employed by Deutsche Bahn in Germany.

A fight for a genuine cost-of-living increase must be taken up in opposition to the corporatist, nationalist trade unions through independent rank-and-file committees. Join the fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and contact us today.



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