

UK bus workers' strike at Arriva North West ends as Unite and GMB push through below-inflation deal

Margot Miller, Tony Robson
22 August 2022

The all-out strike by bus workers at Arriva North West over pay has ended after four weeks as the unions pushed through a below-inflation deal, under conditions of a growing wave of strikes across Britain demanding increases in line with the spiralling cost of living.

Unite and the GMB agreed an 11.1 percent deal with the company last Wednesday. The unions immediately suspended the strike before workers had either seen the proposed offer or balloted. They were directed to return to work and vote to accept the deal over the next two days.

The bus workers at eleven garages across north-west England, including Birkenhead, Bolton, Bootle, Liverpool, Macclesfield, Manchester, Runcorn, Southport, Speke, St Helens, and Winsford had brought services to a standstill since July 20.

On Friday, a Unite press release announced its “2,043 members across 11 Merseyside garages have voted overwhelmingly (by nearly 10 to one) to accept the 11.1 percent offer, worth an additional average £2,300 on the workers’ salaries, equal to an extra £55 per week.”

The pay award is a retreat from Arriva’s original derisory pay offer. But the final settlement is a continuation of its ongoing collusion with Unite and the other unions in preventing a unified struggle by the company’s workers nationally, isolating strike action and undermining their determination to win a cost-of-living pay increase.

The original company offer of either 3 percent or 6 percent with strings was overwhelmingly rejected. A revised 8.5 percent offer across two instalments was considered so derisory it was not put to a vote.

Last week, on August 16, a 9.6 percent offer was emphatically voted down by an 80 percent majority by Unite’s membership. The GMB provided no figures on the scale of the rejection by its members. Both unions made no public statements on whether they were recommending to reject or accept before the vote. They immediately went back into talks with management to discuss a sell-out deal deemed viable to overcome continued opposition.

The unions sabotage a unified struggle

Arriva was faced with a situation in which the determined struggle at Arriva North West stood to be joined by workers at two other subsidiaries in the south of England. Around 900 Arriva workers in

Bedfordshire, Buckingham and Hertfordshire rejected a 4 percent pay offer, or 6 percent with strings, on August 12. On August 17—the day strike action was suspended at Arriva North West—another 800 bus workers in Kent and Essex rejected a 7.8 percent offer.

Threatened with unified action, the company turned to the unions to bail them out. Unite’s claim that the 11.1 percent offer was the best achievable is unsustainable, given the workers at Arriva North West were about to have their hand strengthened by the entry of their colleagues in the south into struggle against the same employer.

What the 11.1 percent actually consists of remains to be seen. Unite has a record of sugar-coating sellout deals, hiding strings attached or engaging in numerical gymnastics to claim a victory. The 11-week bus strike last year at Go North West is a case in point, or more recently the 21-week strike by pallet workers in Chep.

In any case, RPI inflation had by that time already climbed to 12.3 percent on the year and was forecast to rise to 17 percent by 2023. Since last November when inflation was half its current rate, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has made repeated statements that pay increases should at least match RPI, warning of a “calamitous drop” in the standard of living. The deal also preserves inequalities in wages between workers in the same bargaining unit.

What the workers said

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to drivers at Arriva North West in Wythenshawe, Manchester on Tuesday, when the news had just come through that the unions were discussing an 11.1 percent deal with the company.

One driver, referring to the figure of 11.1 percent if agreed, said, “I would think ‘what’s behind it?’”

“When October comes, they [prices] will be going up again. You’re going to see more and more strikes. This will carry on next year because the cost of living is going up.

“I was paying £41 a month for gas and electric, and it went up to over £100. Our pay has gone up by just £1.76/86 an hour since 2015, in seven years! A lot of people are leaving their cars at home and getting pushbikes.

“The amount of people coming out now, there’s going to be a general strike.”

Another picket, Marc, added, “Two or three months ago, it was a

£100 to fill my car. Now it's £120. Every week I go to the shops, I used to spend £60, £70; now it's £80, £90, £100, food has gone right up."

One striker expressed the disgust felt by many workers toward Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer for instructing Labour MPs not to join picket lines of striking rail workers, saying, "Starmer sounds more like a fascist, stamping the working man down."

Picket Mike said, "This is what I don't understand, there's loads of bus companies in Manchester now, why aren't we all one movement. We're all one Unite, especially bus drivers, all transport should be out at the same time. It would solve a lot of things straight away."

The trade unions and the British strike wave

Unite has reverted to the same undemocratic methods it used to end the four week strike at Arriva Yorkshire by 650 bus workers, just as the strike was starting at Arriva North West. The union suspended strike action twice and organised a return to work prior to bus workers voting on revised offers agreed between the union and management. It was only on the second attempt that this succeeded, resulting in a yet further below inflation pay rise of an average 9 percent.

While workers increasingly recognise the necessity for a general strike, they are restrained by organisations like Unite and the GMB, which are unions in name only and side with big business to enforce attacks on jobs, pay and conditions. They have engineered acceptance of below-inflation wage deals, voluntary redundancies and attacks on terms and conditions, even as companies like Arriva Bus UK rake in vast profits.

Unite has closed down yet another dispute to help keep a lid on the growing strike wave across the UK, involving railway workers, dockers and postal workers, with education, health and local government workers preparing to ballot. The unions are working might and main to prevent industrial action they increasingly cannot avert from coalescing into a general strike. This is handing the initiative to the Tory government to proceed with its vicious anti-strike agenda.

Socialist Workers Party apologetics for the unions

The sabotage of the strike has provoked a crisis for the cheerleaders of Sharon Graham among pseudo-left organisations like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

Following the suspension of the strike, the SWP declared the "move is an outrage to democracy. It raises a basic question, Who controls disputes—officials or rank-and-file members?"

But right up to the sellout the SWP had devoted itself to shoring up the union officials' grip on the rank-and-file. Earlier that same day, in an article on the rejection of the 9.6 percent offer, it had enthused, "Unite union reps will soon discuss the next steps to step up pressure on the bosses."

The SWP added, "The pressure is mounting against Arriva—they could have almost 5,000 workers on strike in September if the union officials act quickly. This would massively increase the pressure on

the firm."

Since a rash of pay disputes developed from last autumn, the Unite bureaucracy under Graham has strived to block simultaneous strike action at any two bus companies or even subsidiaries within the same company. The SWP has acted as an apologist for this divide and rule policy.

Forced to concede that Unite and the GMB had presided over a real terms pay cut, the SWP again tries to turn workers back to the "union officials" who, they claim, should have pressed home the advantage.

The article ends with the following: "There is a new mood of resistance as the cost of living crisis deepens workers, and workers take inspiration from the RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers] and CWU [Communication Workers Union] unions' strikes. Unions should be spreading the action." In fact, as with Unite, the RMT and CWU are seeking to contain the fights of rail, postal and telecoms workers, preventing them from developing into a broader struggle against the employers and government.

For rank-and-file committees

The surge in the cost of living—including energy bills for the average household predicted to soar past £4,000 —requires a coordinated counteroffensive against the employers, for wage rises index linked to the cost of living, backdated to include compensation for the erosion of real terms pay since 2008.

Workers' struggles must be unified across different sectors and national borders in opposition to both the global corporations like Arriva owners Deutsche Bahn, and the nationalist, pro-company trade unions. The instruments for this struggle are rank-and-file committees, led by trusted workers and independent of the unions.

Workers can take inspiration not from RMT and CWU bureaucrats, as the SWP suggests, but from the campaign of US autoworker Will Lehman. Lehman, a socialist, is standing as a candidate in the United Auto Workers union election for President, to abolish the union bureaucracy and spearhead the campaign for an International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Announcing his candidacy, Lehman stated, "Change will only take place to the extent that we organise our independent strength, through the formation of rank-and-file committees composed of and controlled by workers, not bureaucrats."

Join the fight to build the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and contact us today.



To contact the WSWP and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)