

Arriva UK Bus hit by pay strikes in south of England

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Arriva UK Bus has been hit by a strike over pay by around 1,500 bus workers at two of its subsidiaries in the south of England who walked out Monday.

RPI inflation, the more accurate measurement which includes housing costs, has climbed to a new 40 year high of 12.3 percent with predictions of it rising to 22 percent next year.

In line with its policy of wage suppression, the company has made derisory below inflation pay offers which have been rejected by bus workers as they fight for a cost of living pay increase.

In Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire 900 members of Unite started a two-day strike from Monday across seven garages—Luton, Aylesbury, High Wycombe, Milton Keynes, Ware, Stevenage and Hemel Hempstead. Picket lines have been well attended. Those involved in the stoppages include drivers, admin staff, engineers, cleaners and shunters.

The original offer by the company was for 4 percent, or 6 percent with strings including a 16.6 percent reduction in overtime rates and ending paid working time not spent behind the wheel.

Further two-day strikes are scheduled for September 16/17, September 20/1 and September 30 and October 1.

Drivers have been informed by Unite that revised offers of 8 percent and 10 percent have been presented by management, but talks broke down on August 30. A Unite briefing stated the company was still putting “a wedge between the depots” and that a verbal offer from talks the previous week “has not transpired today.” The difference in hourly pay between bus drivers at the garages is between £13.67 and £13.45.

In Kent more than 600 bus drivers took strike action Monday at garages in Gillingham, Maidstone, Gravesend and Tunbridge Wells. Their pay is as low as

£12.12 an hour. This is the first of four one day stoppages planned each week this month with more scheduled for September 16, 20 and 30. The action proceeds after the company revised its original offer of 7.8 percent to 10 percent.

Unite’s press release on September 1 stated, “With the real rate of inflation currently standing at 12.3 percent, the offer is a real terms pay cut.” But its negotiating team recommended acceptance of a 10 percent agreement for this year at Arriva London South, which it managed to push through at the end of August. The company praised Unite for its “constructive manner.”

This follows a sell-out deal in May for last year’s award after three days of strike action by around 1,000 drivers in April and May. The recommendation accepting the 3.5 percent, below inflation for the period covered of 7 percent, was justified by claims this would enable a push for a cost of living pay deal for 2022/3.

Back-to-back below inflation deals have been brought about by local union officials working hand in glove with Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham.

A recent video from Graham rebuking the bus companies for empty promises was an exercise in deception. The Unite leader promised action in London and nationally on pay, scheduling and route closures and referred to the current selective strike action at London United by 1,600 bus drivers and ballots at Arriva London North, Abellio, Metroline, and Stagecoach.

At London United the union stalled strike action for the first half of the year—bringing back one insulting pay offer after another. It remains isolated because Unite is prepared to endorse substandard agreements such as at Arriva London South guaranteeing no further action. No reference was made to the outcome of the

pay dispute there, which was followed by 20,000 bus drivers across the capital hoping the earlier strike action would be the start of wider fightback.

The fact that Go-Ahead bus drivers had rejected 9 percent was not mentioned. In relation to the other ballots such as Metroline Travel, bus workers voted unanimously for action against a 4.5 percent offer this year and 1 percent more in January. Unite made this a consultative ballot, meaning that it now goes to an industrial ballot pushing back action against the insulting offer.

Graham referenced “many” deals won above 10 percent, but cited only the recent example of Arriva North West after strike action by 1,800 drivers across 11 garages.

The 10 percent benchmark moves the goalposts, as it is on the lower CPI rate currently standing at 10.1 percent. This exposes Unite’s formal commitment to pay settlements matching RPI as fiction. The pay agreement at Arriva North West was arrived at with no consultation with drivers before the union instructed them to return to work for the ballot. The same underhand methods were used at Arriva Yorkshire against another four-week all out strike by 650 bus drivers. It was ended this time on a deal averaging 9 percent. Unite got this struggle off the agenda as the action started at Arriva North West.

The headline figure of an increase to £15 an hour at Arriva North West is belied by the fact that for the lowest paid drivers at Winsford garage the 11.1 percent amounted to a raise to just £12.30 an hour.

The WSWS spoke to Arriva North West bus drivers at Wythenshawe garage in Manchester following the end of the strike and a pay settlement which Graham described as a “magnificent victory.” Among the drivers who accepted the deal there was a no sense of euphoria. The dead hand of Unite convinced workers that nothing more was achievable. Others were more critical of the union’s divisive role and the claim of victory.

“With inflation up, it’s not enough. We should have come out with Stagecoach, we should be all out together. I’ll have to get a loan to pay the electricity bill. It all ended so fast, the union told us you’re back in work tomorrow,” said one driver.

Another added, “It’s still not enough, we used to have higher wages in 1984.”

Bus workers are engaged in a fight not only against the private operators but also against Unite.

When Unite proves incapable of preventing strikes, official backing and daily strike pay of just £70 is used to keep a firm rein on action. Isolation is maintained while Unite works out a sell-out deal behind the backs of those actually waging the fight. Hot air against fabulously rich companies evaporates as soon as revised offers still below inflation are tabled, which Unite sells as its latest “victory”.

This cycle of division and company-union pay deals to maintain Unite’s sweetheart arrangements with management can only be broken if bus workers form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy and tasked with fighting for demands protecting workers’ living standards not the bottom line of the companies.

The parent company of Arriva, Deutsch Bahn (DB), is owned by the German government and its revenues rose by 18.4 percent in 2021 to €47.3 billion, with a net profit of €5 billion. Unite is playing the card of nationalism to divide bus workers in the Britain from the 30,000 workers the global transport giant employs worldwide, mainly in Germany through its demand against “offshoring profits.”

DB rail workers in Germany waged strikes against the company in a fight for pay and against intolerable working conditions last year, which were betrayed by their union. Any fight against the company requires a joint struggle against the collective exploitation of transport across national borders.

Unleashing the tremendous social power of workers internationally and preventing a never ending race to the bottom is an essential task of a rank and file committees, which must reach out and expand all struggles in opposition to the nationally based and pro-corporate trade unions.



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