

# Hull Stagecoach bus workers mount all-out pay strike

**Tony Robson**  
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Stagecoach bus workers in Hull, East Yorkshire are mounting an all-out strike for a wage increase after three years of a pay freeze.

Drivers at the division of the largest bus and coach operator in the UK are paid just £11.14 an hour. They are demanding an increase to £13 with the same percentage passed on to all other bus workers involved in the strike action, including cleaners, engineers and customer service assistants. The 250 members of Unite voted by 96 percent for strike action which began last Friday and is scheduled to run to December 29.

The company had offered an 8.7 percent increase for this year, well below the current inflation rate of 12.3 percent, or just 14.8 percent over 2 years.

Hull bus workers are determined to resist being pushed deeper into poverty. Their last pay increase, in 2019 before the pandemic, was just 1 percent.

One striker told the *Yorkshire Post*, “We’re prepared to be on strike as long as it takes to give us a deal we can accept... someone at the company told me recently there’s not money in the pot but none of us believe that, we know the money’s there.”

Stagecoach Group’s profits for the year ending April 2022 have risen from £48.1 million to £72.7 million, with reported revenues of £1.2 billion. It is one of many bus operators singled out for takeover and seen as a reliable cash cow by the corporations and banks. The company was subject to a £595 million takeover by DWS Infrastructure in June, which saw off a merger with coach company National Express.

Stagecoach is one of 160 bus and light rail operators in England which has benefited from more than £2 billion worth of Covid subsidies handed out by the Tory government.

The response of Stagecoach to the strike has been to recruit agency staff as a scab workforce to operate a

reduced service. On the first day of the action, around 150 to 200 bus workers and supporters marched in protest to Paragon Interchange from the Foster Street depot.

Unite has not organised any solidarity action against the strike breaking operation. Stagecoach is acting in line with the Truss government’s intention to legislate for the widespread use of agency staff as a strike-breaking force, and to ban strikes on essential services through minimum service requirements.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham spoke last Friday at a rally on the Hull. She issued sound bites on the profits of the company and workers “getting a share”. But the emphasis was on an attempt to reduce bus workers to humble petitioners to the employers, rather than part of insurgent movement against their rampant profiteering. Graham stated, “It is not militant to fight against low pay,” repeating the term “not militant” a total of four times to drive the message home.

The fight to win a genuine pay rise will not be won based on entreaties to the employers, aimed solely at preserving the cosy relations between Unite and the corporations. It requires breaking out of the isolation of the dispute imposed by Unite and mobilising the collective strength of bus workers against the private operators. The conditions exist to mount such a struggle.

Around 200 bus drivers in Sunderland at Stagecoach in the Northeast started 5 days of strike action on October 11. Members of the GMB union have rejected a company offer of just 4 percent with 2 percent to follow.

At First Group subsidiary Kernow in Somerset and Cornwall, around 400 drivers who are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union are taking strike

action on October 11 and 21, and November 4 and 11 after rejecting an offer to increase hourly pay from £11 to just £12.

Around 600 bus drivers who are members of Unite at Arriva Kent paid as low as £12.36 an hour have rejected a 10 percent offer from the company and have taken 6 days of strike action, with 13 more to follow.

The list of strikes, against major operators Stagecoach, First and Arriva, demonstrates that bus workers are not engaged in disputes simply against individual employers. They are fighting to overturn a long deterioration of pay and conditions throughout the public transport sector, in which the unions have served to protect the companies' bottom line.

This collusion was deepened during the pandemic. In addition to pay restraint and an open season on terms and conditions, the unions' deference to the profit motive resulted in the sacrifice of bus workers' lives as they were left with no or little protection against a dangerous virus, suffering one of the highest Covid death rates of any occupation.

There is no attempt by the unions to advance a demand for pay parity across the UK, which would conflict with the multi-tier pay system introduced through privatisation that has led to a race to the bottom. The attempt to reverse this situation in the pay struggles since last year has been sabotaged by Unite.

This is particularly the case at Stagecoach, where Unite prevented 20 pay disputes across its UK network from coalescing into national strike action as it carved out separate below-inflation deals. In the two major strikes it was unable to prevent and officially sanctioned, this resulted in sell-out agreements.

- Stagecoach South Wales – In November 2021, after 17 days of strike action, Unite ended the dispute on a pay settlement bringing bus drivers' wages up to just £10.50 from £9.50 an hour. Unite packaged this miserly sum as a victory, as the 10 percent was above the 6 percent inflation at the time. But it buried the fact it was a 2-year deal, with the company stating it involved productivity strings.

- Stagecoach South Yorkshire – In January 2022, after 25 days of strike action, Unite ended the dispute on another pay settlement falsely packaged as above-inflation, of 10.7 percent. This too was a two-year deal with inflation at 7 percent and represented a de facto pay cut. The central demand of strikers for parity pay

between the garages was jettisoned.

Unite now states that the Hull strike is about pay parity, contrasting drivers' hourly rate of £11.14 to £14 an hour at Stagecoach Merseyside. But while pointing this out it has based its claim on a demand for £13! The only reason Stagecoach bus drivers on Merseyside achieved their rate was because of their determined strike action, having voted down two lower settlements that Unite used to try and end the dispute.

Bus workers should take their fight directly into their hands to end the isolation tactics of Unite and call for solidarity action against the strike-breaking operation. A rank-and-file committee should be established to appeal to bus workers across Stagecoach, First, Arriva and other operators. This includes bus workers in London at Go-Ahead, Abellio and Metroline where strike action against substandard offers is being stalled by Unite.

There should be no return to work before a vote on any revised offer. Unite vetoed this democratic process to end the all out strikes this summer at Arriva Yorkshire and Arriva North West to push through below-inflation deals agreed behind closed doors with management.



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