

Stagecoach West Scotland bus drivers' strike betrayed by Unite

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After nine days of a solid and determined strike in pursuit of an improvement in their pay, 430 bus drivers at Stagecoach West Scotland have been dragooned by company management and Unite trade union officials into accepting a miserable pay deal which meets none of their demands. In the aftermath of the dispute, several workers are reported to have been suspended for picketing.

On June 9, drivers at Stagecoach West Scotland's Kilmarnock, Ayr, Ardrosson and Arran depots went on all-out strike. Their action followed months of evasion and prevarication by Unite officials, desperate to avoid any serious disruption to Stagecoach's operations. Workers initially rejected a 4 percent pay offer in November 2024. After various false starts and three one-day strikes, the all-out strike attracted broad public support, with drivers aiming to increase their hourly rate from £13 to £15 an hour.

Bus services in the area were badly disrupted, with many rural and local services entirely suspended and the most lucrative routes running a reduced service. Because of Unite's delay in authorising action, Stagecoach was able to mobilise a scab workforce from its extended operations to try and break the strike. Workers gave every indication they were determined to pursue their claim. A protest march and rally at Kilmarnock bus station attracted hundreds of bus drivers and supporters.

In response, the Unite apparatus appears to have moved rapidly to close down the dispute. Bus drivers were told June 17 to go back to work the following day as a new offer had been made. The return-to-work order came at short notice, before any new offer was voted on, let alone accepted and without workers even being aware of its contents.

Forced to comment anonymously for fear of

victimisation by Stagecoach and Unite, workers were furious at the decision.

Comments on a social media forum set up by supporters of the drivers included:

“Cannot believe this decision, we shouldn't be going back in until the ballot results are in, surely this isn't how striking works? We've to run in tomorrow but the union can't get the ballot ready till Friday? Am sorry but that makes no sense to me am I alone I pretty much doubt that, what happened to 24hr notice period?...”

“...[I]ndustrial action, including strikes, should only be called off after a deal has been agreed upon and formally accepted by the members through a ballot. It's not standard practice to suspend industrial action before members have had a chance to vote on a proposed settlement.”

“A CLEAR MANDATE WAS SET. £15.00 no T&C's!

“This was made clear by Unite at many times during this, We all voted for Strike with the backing of Unite - Unite Declined EVERY offer on OUR behalf because it included T&C's ... Now look ... Unite have abandoned us!”

Other comments noted that the strike was called off so quickly that families did not even have time to organise childcare for the following day's return to work.

The offer itself is contemptible. While workers were willing to put up a fight for £15 an hour, the offer amounts only to £14 an hour, still less than any other Stagecoach drivers across the UK. Some of the pay increase will be paid by workers themselves in the form of immediate loss of conditions. Minimum lunch break is reportedly reduced from 45 to 35 minutes, while signing on and off time—including time needed to pay in any cash takings—is also reduced.

The offer was enforced through blatant strong-arm methods by Unite and Stagecoach.

The strike pay from Unite was pulled immediately, threatening workers with poverty. Workers expressed anger at Unite and Stagecoach's warning that the Ardrossan depot would be closed if the offer was not accepted, a form of economic blackmail. This follows Stagecoach's decision to close its entire operation in Dumfries and Galloway after the expiration of school bus and local authority contract routes in the region in August.

Some 130 jobs are in immediate danger, with depots in Stranraer and Dumfries facing closure. Stagecoach has come to dominate school buses in many areas using its traditional tactics of undermining smaller operators and pushing them out of business. Stagecoach exercises a near monopoly, which it uses to extract favorable contracts, under threat of entire services collapsing, should local authorities not pay enough to ensure its profit margins. In Dumfries and Galloway, Stagecoach intends only to retain lucrative long-distance routes to Glasgow and Carlisle.

In the face of these tactics from Stagecoach West Scotland and Unite, bus drivers felt they had little option but to accept the deal, despite many calling on social media for a rejection.

As usual, Unite claimed the offer was "overwhelmingly" accepted. Unite general secretary Sharon Graham cynically claimed, "This dispute was all about decency and fair pay. Unite will always stand up for our members fighting for better jobs, pay and conditions." But she was silent on the fate of Unite members sacked for picketing.

Many workers pointed to the extraordinary timing of the decision to end the strike in advance of the Unite Scotland Summer Raceday at Ayr horseracing circuit, June 21. An important promotional venture for the Unite bureaucracy, the sponsored race day covering eight races offered "a thrilling afternoon of top-class action on the track" with local radio stations and DJs in attendance. Unite is clearly far more concerned with ensuring a good attendance at the raceday, and the financial implications of this, than defending its own members.

Unite also suspended a planned strike of Glasgow Subway workers, who face chronic understaffing and long shifts, due over the weekend of June 25-27

simultaneous with the Summer Sessions series of outdoor gigs in the city's Bellahouston Park. Unite described its suspension of the action as an act of "good faith" to consider an interim offer. But Unite's olive branch to the company was rejected "overwhelmingly" by workers who voted the offer down. A one-day strike will begin tomorrow, with further 24-hour stoppages Friday and Saturday.

At root, in addition to being devoted to the success of local cash spigots and its own bank account, the Unite apparatus works to suppress every expression of the class struggle. Of particular concern is anything that might cut across their efforts to isolate the Birmingham bin workers, 350 of whom have been on strike since March 11.

Unite and the Labour government fear that any strike can rapidly become the focal point for a broader mobilisation in defence of jobs, living standards, social and democratic rights, and against the war-mongering policies of the Starmer government. Bus drivers in Stagecoach West Scotland are posed with the same issues as their class brothers and sisters across Stagecoach, and those working for Birmingham City Council, Glasgow Subway and beyond.

To take forward the defence of jobs and conditions, the stranglehold of the Unite leadership over workers' struggles must be broken. Rank-and-file committees can be set up across every depot to take up the issues that Unite has abandoned. This includes a campaign to reinstate workers sacked for trying to defend their livelihoods and stopping the ongoing destruction of vital bus services on which thousands depend.

To organise a discussion on these issues, contact the WSWS today. Fill out the form here to get in touch. All comments will be treated with the strictest confidence.



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