

UK: Arriva Yorkshire bus workers begin indefinite strike over pay

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Arriva Yorkshire bus workers began indefinite strike action on Monday across five garages in north and west Yorkshire—Selby, Heckmondwike, Wakefield, Castleford and Dewsbury.

Around 650 members of Unite, mainly bus drivers but also engineers, voted to strike by a 96 percent majority in rejection of a 4.1 percent pay offer for this year. Drivers explained that this substandard offer was worth even less for those on the higher rate of pay. The pay offer from the company was opposed as a de facto wage cut amid the deepening cost-of-living crisis fuelled by the highest inflation rates in 40 years (9 percent CPI and 11.1 percent RPI).

Arriva Yorkshire announced it would be unable to operate services across most of the county except for parts of north Yorkshire, with major towns and cities impacted including Huddersfield, Halifax, Bradford and Leeds. The company has made an agreement with other local operators First Bus and Transdev to accept the transfer of tickets. BBC Yorkshire reported that 300 buses had been taken off the road as a result of the action. There were well-attended picket lines at depots including more than 20 at Dewsbury and around 40 at Wakefield.

It is rank hypocrisy by Arriva to denounce the strike for its disruption to the travelling public. Such concern has not prevented the private operator from providing an entirely substandard and unreliable service. Arriva Yorkshire has reduced services on Saturdays by replacing the busy weekend shopping day with the lower frequency Sunday timetable.

Furthermore, there is a driver shortage due to the company's singular pursuit of profit. Bus drivers at Arriva Yorkshire start on £9.79 per hour according to the job advert on its website. This is just 29 pence more than the minimum wage. Drivers remain on the rate for

a year.

Longer hours causing fatigue and burnout are responsible for high staff turnover. Another factor leading to staff shortages is the disregard for safety and public health, with the ending of all COVID-19 mitigation measures including isolation rules for staff ill with the virus and no mandatory social distancing or mask wearing.

Following the announcement of the indefinite strike, Unite and management met in further attempts to prevent the action from taking place. It was reported that the meeting last Wednesday ended without any agreement.

After giving notice of strike action on May 25, Unite did not produce any further press releases on the dispute or the failed talks in the run up to the walkout on June 6. In contrast the company has taken to the media to claim that the action is “unjustified” since Unite refused to ballot its members on what Arriva claimed is a substantially improved offer than the 4.1 percent.

It was only on day one of the strike action that these claims were contested by Unite, with regional officer Phil Bown speaking to the BBC who summarised, “Mr Bown said the pay dispute had been going on for more than eight months and that Arriva had offered between 7% and 12%, but most workers would receive the lower end of pay rise which would be 3% below the current inflation rate.”

Much to the disappointment of Arriva, this time around the company could not rely on Unite to follow the normal script of re-balloting to suspend strike action. Additional comments from Bown make clear that to do so would have threatened a revolt by drivers who have made clear their determination to fight.

“I’ve got bus drivers here who are working 40 to 50

hours a week can't afford to live," Bown said. "Some of them are going to food banks to subsidise their income, they shouldn't have to do that—they're full-time workers."

No confidence can be placed in the claim by Bown that Unite will press for a pay increase in line with the cost of living. Even his wording to the BBC was evasive, only referring to an "inflation-related pay increase of around 10%." Even if fully achieved, this is already below the RPI rate that Unite formally claims to use as its criteria for pay increases. But there is nothing accidental about the use of phrases such as "inflation-related" and "around 10%."

Conditions are ripe for a fightback across Arriva, but Unite has spent the past eight months of pay negotiations at Arriva Yorkshire isolating and betraying pay struggles across other regional divisions of Arriva UK Bus based on 3 percent settlements. The union announced the strike action in Yorkshire after ramming through a sellout agreement in London following three days of strike action by 1,000 drivers. General Secretary Sharon Graham stated that the pay settlement was based on an "improved offer", which is a fraud. The betrayal was also facilitated by a campaign of disinformation concealing the fact that the pay offer was half the rate of inflation for the period it covered between 2021-2.

Unite does not headline the fact that other sections of bus workers are entering into struggle at Arriva, it conceals it. The announcement that bus drivers at seven garages at Arriva Herts and Bucks have voted for strike action over pay, by 98 percent, was made on the Unite London and Eastern Facebook group. No central announcement has been made by Unite and there has been no further news of any action almost a fortnight later.

The apparatus of Unite is being used to isolate struggles, spin rotten deals and prevent a challenge to the profits of the private operator based on demands for what bus workers need to protect their living standards.

Graham refers to the fact that Arriva is part of a "multi-billion" company and can afford a decent pay rise, but in practice the union upholds the operational divisions and pushes through below-inflation deals based on what the company claims it can afford. Parent company Deutsch Bahn Group recorded profits of €5 billion last year and boasted to investors that its

revenue losses due to the pandemic had been more than compensated by government subsidies. DB extracts its profits from a global workforce of 300,000, of whom 195,000 are based in Germany.

A network of rank-and-file committees is needed to unlock the social power of the working class and end the artificial division of workers along sectional and national lines in the fight against Arriva. Arriva Yorkshire bus workers should forge links with those in the same pay battle at Arriva South London and Herts and Bucks to fight for a cost-of-living increase for all drivers and bus workers.



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