

UK: Hull Stagecoach bus strike enters fourth week

Our reporters

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Stagecoach bus workers in Hull, East Yorkshire have been on strike for over four weeks, fighting for a pay rise. A demonstration and rally on Saturday of around 200 in the city centre was organised by the local trades council.

Around 250 members of the Unite union—drivers, engineers, cleaners and customer assistants—began all out action on October 7 which is scheduled to run to December 29.

Drivers are demanding an increase from £11.14 an hour to £13 with the same percentage increase passed on to all staff. They have rejected the claim by the largest bus and coach operator in the UK that this is unaffordable. Their demand is viewed as a step towards parity with drivers at Stagecoach Merseyside on £14 an hour.

Stagecoach profits have rebounded since the beginning of the pandemic, increasing from £48.1 million to £72.7 million to April this year with reported revenues of £1.2 billion. The company was subject to a £595 million takeover in June by DWS Infrastructure, showing how private bus operators are viewed as a lucrative cash source by global financiers.

In comparison Stagecoach bus workers who have produced the profits on the frontline of a pandemic and were hailed as key workers have been subjected to a pay freeze. The last pay award at Stagecoach Hull was worth just 1 percent in 2019, the equivalent of 11 pence for the past three years as inflation has surged to 12.6 percent. Bus workers at the Foster Street depot rejected an offer of £12.50 an hour for drivers and a similar percentage increase for other staff when they voted by a 96 percent majority for strike action.

Their determined stand has been met by a strike breaking operation. This involved the hiring of agency staff, with the government introducing legislation in

July for this to be adopted as a universal practice. But according to drivers Stagecoach has based its scabbing operation more generally on enlisting management and drivers from other areas of its UK operations.

In contrast to the national strike breaking operation waged by Stagecoach, Unite, with a membership of over 1.2 million and representing 80,000 public sector transport workers, has left Hull Stagecoach bus workers isolated. It instead huddled into talks at conciliation service ACAS to reach an agreement with the company.

These efforts by Unite have proved fruitless with talks ending on October 17. Phillip Norton from *BBC Look North* reported Friday that an email from Stagecoach to Unite stated, “collective bargaining has been exhausted and it is acceptable and permissible to make direct offers to individuals.” The BBC report claimed that the company was prepared to meet the pay demand while reporting in passing the fact this was for a two-year period.

According to Unite the offer was based on the already rejected offer and in a press release described the company approaching workers individually as an attempt to “union-bust.” Unite has not lifted a finger to oppose the strike breaking operation.

Stagecoach is following in the footsteps of BT Group and Royal Mail which imposed de facto pay cuts for awards this year having cited a similar justification that pay talks had been exhausted.

In response Unite has pitched itself entirely to the heads of Stagecoach. Unite regional officer Harriet Eisner stated, “Stagecoach’s local manager Matt Cranwell is attempting to circumnavigate negotiations by pressuring individual members to accept a deal they have already rejected. It is time for Stagecoach’s more senior leadership to step in so talks can be entered into

sensibly.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with a striking bus worker at Hull, who said, “We've got no spare cash for anything. With Christmas coming, it's a worry, you can't find the money for it.

“We lost one driver here from COVID. We had masks when the pandemic first started. Lots of us were furloughed. Those of us who worked, we did have masks. When people started coming back it all went. The company just didn't think it was a priority.

“It is rubbish for the company to say our pay demand is unaffordable. They don't need to put prices up, they are profitable. They were paid not to run buses here during the pandemic”—a reference to the subsidies paid out to the private operators of £2 billion by the government.

The striker emphasised that while bus workers were determined to win in Hull, the struggle could not be successful simply at a local level.

“The union here has proved to be strong today, it sounds like we're starting from scratch but I think we are strong and I think we will win this battle in the end. It's other depots, other garages that need to follow suit.

“I think it's a joke that they we can have so many prime ministers undemocratically elected. I'm all for a general strike, but it will only take one of the big unions to drag their heels and it will fall.”

The line-up of speakers from Hull Trades Council consisted of many union officials—including from the National Education Union and Unison, both currently stringing out ballots preventing hundreds of thousands from joining a strike wave in education and the National Health Service. In June, Unison pushed through a below inflation pay agreement of between 6 and 10.5 percent on local government workers, stating it was close to the unions claim and the best in years.

Behind slogans of solidarity there was empty tub thumping over the cost-of-living crisis and austerity. Unite branch secretary Kris Allen told the rally that Hull Stagecoach bus workers were “more close than they have ever been,” adding, “we will this dispute.”

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has established a working relationship with Stagecoach since last year, as the union ensured that a series of some pay 20 disputes did not gel into national action. This became the premise for a series of locally based agreements paving the way for below inflation deals up

and down the country. The £14 and hour agreed at Merseyside, cited by those on strike in Hull in their demand for pay parity, was only won in July as a result of bus workers rejecting two previous offers drawn up between Unite and the company to end strike action.

At Arriva Kent 600 bus drivers have reportedly won a 13.92 percent increase, but this was only after six days of industrial action and opposition to the below inflation deals pushed through recently in London by Unite at Go-Ahead (10.5 percent) and Arriva London North (11.1 percent). Unite has worked throughout to prevent London wide action, which Graham had falsely claimed was being prepared through the Bus Combine of reps, with both substandard agreements hailed as “victories.”

The growing resistance of bus workers is placing them on a collision course with Graham and the attempt to revive the authority of the bureaucracy over workers struggles, on the basis that Unite does what it says “on the trade union tin”. In a visit to the Hull Stagecoach picket line at a rally held to support the action, Graham went out of her way to insist that the struggle had nothing to do with militancy. Even this term is viewed by the union bureaucracy as encouraging sentiments that cut across its intimate relations with the private operators.

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 all operators.



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