

# Bus drivers in South Yorkshire, England, strike over pay

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On July 20, 800 bus drivers throughout South Yorkshire, England, began indefinite strike action from midnight in an ongoing dispute over pay. The drivers are employed by the First Group bus company.

The First network comprises 190 routes serving Sheffield, Rotherham, Doncaster, North East Derbyshire, the Peak District, the East Riding of Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire. First owns 620 buses and its services account for 70 percent of bus services in Sheffield and 65 percent in both Rotherham and Doncaster.

The strike began following the breakdown of talks on June 19 between First management and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) that represent the striking workers. The union has been in negotiations with management since April, when workers were due an annual pay increase. In a ballot, members of the TGWU voted by a majority of 878 votes to 65 to take strike action pending an agreement over pay.

First is one of a number of private bus services in South Yorkshire, with other bus companies running normal services during the first 48 hours of the stoppage. Despite this the strike caused widespread disruption as an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 people use First bus services in the region. The industrial action is costing First hundreds of thousands of pounds a day in lost revenue.

Workers set up picket lines at bus depots across the region, including one at Olive Grove in Sheffield. None of the 307 scheduled buses left the garage.

The company condemned the strike and said that the union had rejected a pay offer on July 16 that “gave an above inflationary increase in the basic rate of pay to all staff and a reduction in the working week from 39 hours to 38 hours.”

Drivers reject this claim and have protested that the

proposed “rise” would represent an increase of only 24 pence an hour over the next two years.

The TGWU said that it had a prior agreement with the company that senior drivers in South Yorkshire were to be paid at a top rate of £8.10 an hour by April next year and all qualified drivers the same by April 2006. Drivers’ pay in South Yorkshire varies from company to company in a generally low-paid industry, with the top rate for a driver at First Group in the region currently standing at £7.53. The union added that its prior agreement for a raise still fell short of the average rate for bus drivers across Yorkshire. The highest rate of £8.10 an hour at First compares to an average of £8.50 an hour that other drivers across Yorkshire are paid. Many South Yorkshire drivers are paid at a rate of just £5.85 per hour, which is just £1.35 an hour more than the national minimum wage.

The TGWU said the latest strike action was called as a last resort and that it was keen to accept a 4 percent pay deal if offered. It said that such a settlement would cost the company a total of £368,000. The regional organiser for TGWU, Steve Clark, said, “We thought we were on the point yesterday of getting a 4 percent offer from management. Unfortunately the company then turned away from that and said they couldn’t offer the element of back pay. In lengthy talks this week we had made some progress toward improving pay but we made it clear any deal should be from 1st April. The company refused and the drivers have done exactly what we said they would.”

In return for a 4 percent pay increase, Clark claimed that First has now demanded further concessions from its staff. He added, “The only way they are prepared to offer it is if these lads give up some of their holiday and sick pay.”

A spokesman for the company said at the beginning



of the strike that it had withdrawn its initial offer and that negotiations would continue. On July 21, it was reported that First made a subsequent pay offer to the TGWU at a meeting with union officials. Talks continued July 22 and 23 and have yet to reach agreement.

Low pay has been the central point of previous disputes at the company. Workers at First Group also struck over pay in June of last year. Over 1,000 drivers struck for three days, leading to First offering a revised pay increase of 5.8 percent that was accepted.

Last month on June 16, the Transport and General Workers' Union called off a planned strike due to be held the next day by drivers employed by First Bus in Bradford, in neighboring West Yorkshire. A new pay deal was accepted by drivers.

One striking driver told the local Sheffield newspaper, the *Star*, that he had worked for the company for more than 20 years. "Everyone is disgusted at the pay deals we have been given. They have offered us 20 pence an hour this year, followed by another four pence an hour next year—that's for drivers who have been with the company a long time. Drivers with shorter service will get even less. Then they offered us an 'improved' three-year deal, but with so many conditions they were giving with one hand and taking away with the other. They wanted to take away our Bank Holiday premium rate money and our first two days of sick pay.

"The union has decided on an indefinite all-out strike rather than odd days here and there. They reckon it's the only way we will achieve anything. I do think it's terrible for the passengers and I feel bad about the inconvenience it will cause to people. For old people, especially, buses are a lifeline. If they didn't catch a bus then they'd never speak to anybody."

Another driver interviewed said, "The company is making a lot of profit and wastes a lot of money on stupid things, yet they are only offering drivers a measly 24p an hour over two years.... The pay rise we have been offered just doesn't reflect the hassle we have to put up with."



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