

Leeds bus workers strike over pay

Barbara Slaughter
18 June 2016

More than 1,000 bus drivers and customer hosts employed by First Bus Leeds struck for 24-hours on June 13 in pursuit of a pay increase. First Bus operates 63 of the Leeds' bus routes and almost the whole city was brought to a halt by the action, which began at 2 a.m. Monday.

Bus workers are demanding a wage increase of 36 pence per hour (51 US cents). After rejecting management's offer of a 10 pence an hour (14 US cents) increase, in a ballot for strike action, 90 percent voted in favour in an 80 percent turnout. On June 9, management's "final offer" was put to a branch meeting by Unite trade union officials. This represented an immediate pay increase of 16 pence per hour (23 US cents) and a further 20 pence (28 US cents) next January. The 250 workers at the meeting voted unanimously to reject the offer and begin a campaign of strike action.

On June 13, pickets were outside the garages from early morning.

One of the pickets, who wished to remain anonymous, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the wages and working conditions at the Leeds depots. He said that drivers could be rostered to work anything from seven to 12 hour shifts. They regularly have to sit in the cab for up to five-and-a-half hours at a stretch, with only four minutes turnaround time at the end of each run.

He said angrily, "They wouldn't treat a tin of beans like that, but that is how they treat human beings. The schedules are worked out by computer, paying little regard to the actual conditions on the road, and as a result are so tight that it is almost impossible to maintain them and lost time has to be made up. The constant pressure affects the health of bus workers and cases of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart problems and obesity are common."

He explained that there is a three-tiered pay system

for workers who are essentially doing the same job. New starters have to work between 42 and 44 hours for £20,000 (US\$28,400).

Long-standing workers on the "A rate" work 36 hours for the same amount, but then can choose to work an extra seven-and-a-half hours of overtime, but without any kind of enhancement. He said the work was so structured, it was impossible for new starters to ever achieve the A rate of pay.

He continued, "The company is constantly having to recruit new staff because young people just can't do it. It's donkey work. It's just work, sleep and back again. It messes up your body. They [the company] are always short staffed. Many of the lads pick up extra shifts because the pay is not enough to live on."

First Bus run bus services in many other cities including Manchester, Bristol, Huddersfield, Halifax, Glasgow and Aberdeen. They also run one fifth of the UK's passenger rail network, including Great Western Railways, Trans-Pennine Express, First Hull Trains, Train-Link in London and others. The company began with a management buyout of the Bristol Omnibus Company and expanded through purchases of formerly publicly-owned bus and rail companies in England and Wales in the 1980s. Since then, they have invested in transport companies throughout North America.

In the UK, bus workers' wages and conditions differ from city to city. For example, drivers in nearby Halifax are paid £2 per hour more than drivers in Leeds. The Leeds drivers are among the lowest paid of First Bus operations in the county of Yorkshire. Last year, the company made £11million (15,580,000 \$US) clear profit over turnover from its Leeds operation alone.

On the day of the strike, WSWs reporters distributed leaflets to pickets about the recent strike of bus workers in San Diego, California, employed by First Transit. This company is part of the same multinational, First

Group plc.

Several of the pickets already knew of the San Diego dispute and were interested to read the report of the strike. One picket said, “We are facing the same battles to put food on the table for our families. All we want is a normal decent life. But that is becoming less and less possible.”

Unite is currently organising a 100,000 signature petition to present to the Conservative government, calling for a reduction in the maximum time a driver can be expected to be in the cab to be reduced to four-and-a-half hours from five-and-a-half hours. Asked by the WSWs why the union would seek to pressure the David Cameron-led anti-worker Tory government to defend workers’ conditions, Phil Bown, a Unite official, replied: “You’ve got to start somewhere.”

According to Unite, First Bus in the UK generates a third of its profits from its Leeds operation. Leeds First Bus recently pushed through redundancies when it got rid of its two-person-operated “bendy buses”, which employed a host as well as the driver. While the drivers will be absorbed into the workforce, the hosts were offered redeployment but would have to apply for any available suitable posts throughout the group’s national operation.

The vote and high turnout for the one-day strike shows the determination of the drivers to take on the company. A further 24-hour strike is planned for June 20, with negotiations between management and Unite, aimed at ending the dispute, underway.



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