UK Bus workers suspended in Leeds following strike

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2 July 2016

Twenty-two of 1,000 Leeds bus workers currently in a pay dispute at First Leeds have been suspended.

The bus drivers and customer hosts struck for 24 hours on June 13 in pursuit of a pay increase of 36 pence per hour. First Leeds operates 63 of the Leeds bus routes.

Although the details of the case have not been disclosed, either by the company or the Unite union, a worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the drivers had been disciplined for bringing the firm into disrepute, due to comments made on a private Facebook page. Bus workers said a Unite trade union branch secretary, who is one of the 22, was escorted off the premises by security.

Workers are angry at the suspensions. A driver said, "I thought we should have declared an immediate stoppage. We have to get behind the lads, otherwise management will see it as a sign of weakness. They are obviously thinking, 'We need to go for the jugular. Let's get the ring leader and show who's boss.' If we don't make a stand they will think they can do what they want with us."

In Leeds there are three pay rates, with drivers almost literally having to wait for "dead men's shoes"—when someone on the top rate leaves and another can take his or her place. All over the UK, the Unite union is presiding over a situation whereby bus workers are paid myriad different rates for doing the same job, both between private companies and within those companies.

London bus transport, for example, is in the hands of 17 different companies, which in some cases pay as many as five different rates. Hourly rates can vary from £9.75 to £15.26. Metroline London, owned by Comfort DelgGro, has three rates: a starter rate, W0 of £28,000, W1 of £30,000 and W2 of £33,000. Transfer from W1 to W2 is impossible and W2 will disappear in time. This is just one of the many complications in the pay structure in London.

In January 2015, the anger among 27,000 bus workers across the whole of London was so great that Unite was forced to call a 24-hour strike to demand some kind of parity. It was the first all-London strike since privatisation 21 years ago. However, this was just a mechanism for allowing workers to let off steam. Nothing was achieved and the union dropped the issue.

Similarly, Sadiq Khan, the new Labour Party mayor of London, whose father was a bus driver, made the resolution of differences in bus workers' pay one of his campaign pledges. Nothing has been heard of it since his election.

It suits the trade union bureaucracy to have a divided workforce, which is easier to control. The differences in pay and conditions that exist came about as a result of rotten concessions made over years. In contrast to the union bureaucracy, workers in Leeds are supportive of uniting with other bus workers. On the Leeds picket line, one worker said, "If management can bring in managers from other areas to scab on our strike, why can't we unite with the workers in those areas in a common purpose?"

First runs 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.

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There have recently been a number of strikes of bus workers over wages and working conditions, including in London, Manchester, Huddersfield, Halifax, Bradford and currently in Leeds and Weymouth (employed by First Bus Dorset).

Bus workers in Leeds need to take the dispute out of the hands of the union and set up a rank-and-file committee to organise their struggle. They must fight against the union's divide-and-rule policy by forging links with transport workers and others in a common struggle. That includes links across national boundaries, such as with bus workers in San Diego in the United States, who have been in recent struggle against their employer, First Transit. First Transit is part of the FirstGroup, which owns First Bus.

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