

# UK: Weymouth and Bridport bus drivers escalate strike action

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3 August 2016

First Group (First Hampshire & Dorset Ltd) bus drivers in Weymouth and Bridport belonging to the Unite trade union are stepping up their six weeks running industrial action by striking for seven days from August 8.

However, planned strikes for this week, on August 1 and 3, were cancelled by the Unite trade union after it was warned it had failed to give First Group the correct statutory notification of the strikes under the anti-democratic Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1992. A company spokesperson said, “We raised with Unite the fact that the notice of strike action was incorrect. Once we had raised that with Unite, they notified us of their intention to withdraw the strike notification accordingly.”

The union claimed that due to a technical fault in the system that collects dues from its members, the striking bus drivers were not protected by the union and could have been sacked.

The 110 drivers started their strike on June 20 with the demand for a 13 percent pay rise to end poverty wages of £8.80 per hour. This wage rate places them as the lowest paid workers in the company, which operates buses in several cities including London, Manchester, Bristol, Huddersfield, Halifax, Glasgow and Aberdeen.

The depth of anger felt by the drivers at their low wages is such that nearly 90 percent voted in favour of the strike. But First Group was adamant that the drivers could only be given a 2.3 percent pay increase spread over two years, claiming they “are not able to agree to inflation busting pay demands which will cripple our local business.” These words were spoken just as the company announced profits of £52 million for its UK-wide bus division.

The company has used various strikebreaking

methods against the drivers. Drivers from other depots have been brought to work in the Weymouth and Bridport area, with the offer of higher rates of pay, accommodation and free meals. Some drivers, who are suffering from cancer and serious heart conditions and cannot work, have been told by company bosses they will have their sick pay docked while the strike continues.

Bus drivers told the *World Socialist Web Site* about their low pay and the struggle they have to make ends meet. Many were outraged by the bullying and intimidation tactics of the company management, including cutting the pay of their ill work colleagues.

On the picket line in Weymouth, one worker explained, “I worked for the same bus company in Bristol where I used to get £9.50 but now I get only £8.80 despite years of experience as a driver. It is very difficult when you have a family to feed.”

Explaining the exploitative conditions prevailing in First Bus group, a worker who was made redundant from the company in Barnstaple said, “I was made redundant with another 120 workers. Many who had not worked more than two years did not get any redundancy pay. Even those who received redundancy pay have had it capped.”

A young bus driver who has two children said, “I went to a mortgage adviser with my pay slips to discuss a house. Having looked at my pay slips, they told me that I could borrow £40,000. I don’t think I could even buy a beach hut with that. This is after working long hours without seeing my children.”

There have recently been a number of bus worker strikes over wages and working conditions, including in London, Manchester, Huddersfield, Halifax, Bradford and Leeds.

Unite called off a planned indefinite strike due to

begin on July 26 by 1,000 First Group bus workers in Leeds saying that they had received a “much improved” pay offer. Details of the offer are yet to be revealed.

Although Unite agreed to halt the Leeds strike, it is reported that a dismissed trade union branch secretary has not been reinstated. First Bus suspended 22 workers, including the branch secretary, during last month’s industrial action, in order to intimidate the workers not only in Leeds but other areas of the country.

First Bus in Weymouth and Bridport is relying on the isolation of the strike by the union to impose their conditions on the drivers. Unite, which boasts of having 1.4 million members in the UK and Ireland has 18,000 members in the First Bus Group.

However, Unite have made sure that the strikes by bus workers around the country are kept isolated and fragmented. At a Leeds picket line, one worker told the WSWs , “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?” The same question came up on the picket line in Weymouth.

Last month, Unite organised a demonstration a few miles away from Weymouth, in another dispute with Dorset County Council over pay. But no calls were made for this to be united with the striking bus workers.

Unite issues one press release after another in workplaces where they have members, complaining about onerous working conditions, poverty wages and other issues. But all of this conceals their crucial role in dissipating and suppressing struggles along with their counterparts in other trade unions.

Whenever the union bureaucrats are forced to call industrial action due to the anger and militancy of their members, they ensure that it remains isolated—the Weymouth bus drivers’ dispute being a prime example. The “support” offered by other trade unions remains purely verbal and often a cover for allowing their own members to continue working.

Speaking about the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT), a driver said the “RMT gives lip services about supporting our strike but they do not organise their members to take part in the industrial action. So their members are working here whilst we are on strike.”

The low wages and ghastly working conditions bus drivers face is a direct product of decade’s long suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions and Labour Party.

The latest disputes in Leeds and Weymouth demonstrate the need for drivers to take the dispute out of the hands of the union and establish an independent rank-and-file committee. They must fight against the union’s divide-and-rule policy by forging links with transport workers and other workers who are being battered by the Tory government’s austerity policies.



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