

UK: First Bus drivers to vote on revised pay-offer after Unite calls off strikes

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First Bus drivers in Sheffield, Doncaster, Rotherham, South Yorkshire and the neighbouring North Derbyshire Dales are being balloted Tuesday on a revised pay-offer from the company. Unite is recommending acceptance after it called off two 24-hour strikes due on July 27 and August 3, citing an “improved offer” from First Bus South Yorkshire.

The offer reportedly involves a miserly 17 pence an hour increase and a one-off payment of just £320, which the union is selling as an extra week’s wages.

Drivers for South Yorkshire First Bus say opinions on the revised deal are divided. The company offer is widely viewed as an insult, equating to an increase of just 1.6 percent. Inflation in the UK is currently running at close to two percent. But many drivers have no confidence they will get anything better, with Unite sabotaging any real fight against the company.

Last week’s announcement marked the third time this month that Unite has called off strike action by First Bus drivers in South Yorkshire. On June 13, drivers voted to strike by a large majority—69 percent—with 79 percent voting for industrial action short of a stoppage. After the ballot results were announced, Unite regional officer Phil Bown told local media that Unite’s members were “not going to put up with the insulting offer of a one-year pay freeze.” But the union moved quickly to call off industrial action scheduled for June 29 and July 1.

The June 29 strike was cancelled by Unite in deference to the government-sponsored Armed Forces Day “as a mark of respect for veterans.” Seizing on the event to promote patriotism and suppress strikes, Bown told the *Sheffield Star*, “Our dispute is with First South Yorkshire and not with current and past members of the armed forces who have bravely served their country.”

Just days later, Unite announced the strike scheduled

for July 1 would also be cancelled, with Unite citing “constructive talks” with the company. While details of the closed-door negotiations were not made public, the outcome was a pay-offer that even Unite described as “pitiful”—but only after it was decisively rejected by drivers.

The latest pay-offer recommended by Unite resolves none of the issues facing drivers: low pay, long and unsociable shifts, management bullying and the threat to jobs posed by the announced impending sale of First Bus. Unite’s aim from the start was to wear down the opposition of drivers so they would accept the company’s offer.

Over recent months, bus operators First, Stagecoach and Arriva have faced one wage dispute after another with drivers in Edinburgh, Preston, London, Hampshire and Dorset, Teesside, Durham and South Yorkshire. Unite has deliberately kept each of these disputes partitioned off from one another and close each one down, often on the flimsiest pretext.

The global FirstGroup, which operates First Bus South Yorkshire, is in the process of selling off its British bus operations, which account for a fifth of bus services outside London. Unite’s acquiescence to the company’s wage suppression signals its refusal to fight potential job losses and asset stripping by any new operator.

At its annual general meeting on July 25, the FTSE 250 FirstGroup corporation confirmed its “portfolio rationalisation plans,” noting “overall trading performance in the first quarter has been in line and there is no change to our expectations for the current financial year.” First Group made £65 million in profits from its UK bus division for the year ending 31 March 2019.

Garry Birmingham, a First managing director, wrote

to drivers last month urging them to vote against industrial action. He claimed a one-year pay freeze on all staff, including managers, was necessary because the company's accounts showed "another significant operating loss." He told First drivers they should be grateful for the supposedly generous terms they enjoy, citing figures that are appallingly low as they are for all bus drivers.

"Our weekly bus driver wage is £449, annual salary of £23,358, which is £11.23 an hour and in addition they receive six weeks holiday and bank holidays," he declared. This is a miserly income for working on busy and congested roads, selling tickets and passes and frequently dealing with passenger safety issues. Drivers are on the frontline of dealing with a myriad of social problems.

Unite's sabotage of the strike-vote is a re-run of its role in selling out last year's strikes by Supertram drivers and conductors in Sheffield. Supertram workers gave solid support to the strike with well-attended pickets fighting for a 50 pence per hour wage increase to address years of effective pay cuts. But Unite kept Supertram workers isolated and called off planned rolling strikes to recommend a reduced three-year pay deal that was not backdated to before the strike—effectively fining workers for taking industrial action and ensuring they funded their own wage "increase."

There is widespread support for public transport workers, with growing anger over the gutting of services. But Unite's pro-company strategy deliberately prevents any broader appeal. Throughout the dispute, Unite has instructed drivers they must not speak publicly about their demands. Yet the company has shown no such compunction, using the media to sour opinion against the drivers. This includes First Bus's claims that any wage increase would mean higher fares and cuts to services.

In order to take forward their struggle, First Bus drivers must oppose Unite's pro-company strategy that blocks any unified challenge to the global transport conglomerates. Rank-and-file committees should be organized among drivers, mechanics and cleaners, linking up with Arriva and Stagecoach workers, Supertram drivers and conductors and rail workers both nationally and across Europe. Such committees can win support throughout the working class, fighting for

socialist policies including a free high-quality public transport system for all.



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