

UK: Bus workers at First Manchester strike against pay restraint

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Around 300 bus workers at the Oldham garage of private bus operator First Manchester continued their strike this week against pay restraint.

The action, affecting services across Greater Manchester, has involved two one-day stoppages this week, on Tuesday and Thursday, with further days of action scheduled next week on January 24 and 26.

Two 24-hour stoppages were held last week after the members of Unite voted by 99 percent for strike action.

Unite's first response to the determined strike vote was to try and avert industrial action altogether. But last-ditch talks with management on January 7 broke down as the company refused to honour commitments to backdate any pay increase to last August.

First Manchester is owned by First Group, the second largest bus operator in the UK. It runs a fifth of all bus routes and is the largest rail operator. The UK-owned transnational company employs 100,000 globally and boasts £4.3 billion annual revenue from its UK operations alone.

The strike action at Oldham has been solid with a mass turnout on the picket line and First Manchester reporting that all its main services were cancelled on this week's strike days.

First Manchester bus workers have decided to extend their action. Unite announced on Wednesday a new round of strikes from January 31, with a further 11 days of strike action during February—three one-day stoppages a week.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has issued the same pro-forma statement that has preceded every sell-out pay deal the union has organised over the past year: "Unite now does exactly what it says on the trade union tin: it always fights to defend our members' jobs, pay and conditions. The union will be providing its full support to our members at First Manchester until this

dispute is resolved."

The exact opposite is the case. The constant repetition by Graham of this cliché borrowed from the Ronseal veneer advert cannot mask the reality. This is borne out by the experience of transport workers in Manchester and the north-west of England, who have been at the centre of workers' opposition across the transport sector.

The rollcall of derisory pay deals following Sharon Graham's election as General Secretary of Unite in August 2021 includes:

- **October 2021** with inflation (RPI) at 4.8 percent, Unite ended strike action by 300 tram workers at Manchester Metrolink on a 3 percent pay increase for 2021 and the same amount for 2022. Strike action by 250 bus workers in Preston and Chorley due to take place on October 14 at Stagecoach and subsidiary Ribble Road Motors was suspended for agreements of 4.4 percent and 2.5 percent respectively. Strike action by 1,000 bus drivers in Greater Manchester at Stagecoach from October 26 was suspended to pave the way for a pay award of just 3.7 percent.

- **November 2021** with inflation at 5 percent (RPI), Unite suspended strike action twice by 1,000 bus drivers at Arriva North West in Liverpool in favour of a 3 percent pay agreement which was backed by Unite in a joint statement with the GMB union and company.

This followed Unite's betrayal of a determined 11-week strike by 400 Manchester bus drivers at Go North West against "fire and rehire" contracts. The union's "leverage" campaign championed by Graham was credited with forcing a withdrawal of the company's ultimatum. Unite signed a deal with parent company Go-Ahead, delivering millions of pounds in cuts at the expense of the jobs, terms and conditions of bus workers.

As First Manchester, bus workers began their struggle just as Unite was betraying all-out strike action by 560 Stagecoach Yorkshire bus workers based on a below inflation agreement. Falsely packaged as a 10.7 percent “huge” increase, it is a two-year agreement and maintains the same pay gap between garages which the joint strike action was fighting to overturn.

At First South Yorkshire in Sheffield, Unite has stalled action by hundreds of bus workers who voted by 93 percent to strike in a consultative ballot last October. They are fighting changes introduced during the pandemic forcing them to work five-and-a-half hours without a break. They have continually rejected management proposals to cut their terms and conditions and introduce strings to any pay award. Unite has only recently agreed to hold an official strike ballot.

Workers are not just in a fight against the employers but against an organisation which is a union in name only. It functions to suppress strike action and guarantee a greater portion of the wealth to the corporations and their shareholders.

While Graham feigns opposition to the private operators by criticising the profits of First Group, the question arises, how have these gains have been possible under conditions of a raging pandemic in which workers are exposed to infection, long term disability and death?

No worker believes the insincere official tributes paid to them as key workers by the government and employers, which Unite and the other unions still present as good coin. Their sickening hypocrisy is a facade behind which the unions have worked more closely with management, providing a free license for the ripping up of workplace safety, terms and conditions.

While Unite demanded sacrifice from workers to help the bus companies through the pandemic, the latter received government subsidies of more than £1 billion by the end of 2020, and still receive millions more each week to cover lost revenue. Additional handouts came through the furlough scheme even as First Group (along with other bus companies) refused to top up the 80 percent of wages provided by the government. The company announced a £500 million pay-out to its shareholders last year.

Unite has refused to formulate a pay demand at First Manchester, even after workers, who are paid an hourly

rate of £12.40, have suffered a pay freeze throughout the pandemic and with inflation running at a 30-year high of 5.4 percent CPI and 7.5 percent RPI.

The union describes as a “sticking point” the fact that First Manchester intends to rob workers of any pay increase, however meagre the offer, by refusing to backdate it. The company’s stance has cut across Unite’s attempt to forestall strike action by packaging the most meagre pay offer as a win.

First Manchester bus workers should draw the lessons from the long list of disputes sabotaged by Unite. Against the divisions maintained by the union on behalf of the private operators, a unified fight is needed. The fight for a living wage means a wider struggle against the criminal response to the pandemic by the entire ruling elite.

The Johnson government and its de facto allies in the Labour Party are removing all public health measures to suppress the pandemic even as infection rates, hospitalisations and deaths refute the official mantra of ‘living with the virus’. The working class cannot live with the pandemic nor with the vast redistribution of wealth at its expense. Rank-and-file committees must be built throughout the working class to prepare for mass industrial and political action to eliminate the pandemic and end the subordination of urgent social needs to corporate profit.



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